

Green

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Summary: A green ONI agent is placed with one of the UNSC's most hardened soldiers. But is it fate that they are together, or something more? A/N: As canonical as possible.

1. Bright Green

Chapter 1: Bright Green

If there was one word that people commonly used to describe Lieutenant Kelly Martin of the Office of Naval Intelligence, it was green. The young lieutenant had no ground experience, had been in zero engagements with Insurrectionists, and, while she could fire a gun to save her life, her aim was no good and she was not strong enough to use more than the standard-issue pistol. She commonly misunderstood what tactics would be used in the field, instead offering up classroom procedures when asked—and she rarely was. The only reason she was a part of ONI at all was because of her textbook intelligence. She'd been top of her graduating class of nearly one thousand, and out of so many, had still managed to stand out for the very reason ONI wanted her—her computer skills. While Kelly may not have had the field skills looked for in most recruits, she could hack into any computer, break any code she was given, and could speak almost every language recognized by the UNSC. While this may have secured her position years ago and made her an invaluable member of any team, now there were AIs for her job that worked faster than she could. Kelly was a genius born twenty years too late. She was more suited for menial desk work translating and decrypting intercepted Insurrectionist transmissions than being anywhere in the field. So what was she, Kelly Martin, ONI's greenest lieutenant, doing in the briefing room with half a dozen of the highest ranked officials in the UNSC—including two whom she knew specialized in coordinating field operations—and ONI's infamous AI?

The room was big and not very well lit. The officers were seated at desks on a raised dais in an almost half-circle formation. Kelly

fought the urge to fiddle with her class ring while she waited, feeling uncomfortable. She didn't understand why she was here. Above her, heated arguments were whispered until finally someone deigned to notice her.

"Thank you for joining us today, Lieutenant Martin," a man said, rifling through some papers held close to his desk light.

A woman took over. "I assume you don't know why you're here."

"That is correct, ma'am," Kelly replied politely.

The man spoke again. "We've found an anomaly in your file, Lieutenant. It seems as though you have no real-world experience to back your training. Is this true?"

Crap. Kelly had a feeling she knew where this was going. "Yes sir."

"Excellent," another man spoke up. "We have an opening for you in the field. It is time for you to put your skills and training to good use."

Yet another officer took over. "You are to report to the _Commonwealth_ tomorrow at 0700. You are then to accompany the crew and assist in any way necessary. Should the, uh—" she hesitated, "troops aboard need your skills, you are to assist them and accompany them into battle if need be. You will report their progress back to ONI Section 3. You will answer to Captain Wallace, and you will be returned to us as he sees fit. Good luck."

"Thank you, ma'am," Kelly replied, masking her dread.

"Dismissed," the first man said.

Kelly snapped off a salute and, after it was returned, she vanished from the room.

As she headed back to her bunk to miserably pack and wonder what she'd done to deserve this, the argument that had halted before resumed. "It won't work," Dr. Halsey, the only civilian in the room, said firmly. "She's too young, too inexperienced-."

"Too green," someone else cut in.

Halsey nodded. "Exactly. She's too green. He won't even give her the time of the day. None of them will. They'll just see her as a 'snag' in the plan. Just another way to slow them down."

"It _will_ work," Colonel Ackerson argued heatedly, eager to oppose anything Halsey said. "He won't ignore her or look down on her. Beowulf ran all the simulations. It's not going to happen. You saw his conclusions." The AI nodded and Ackerson continued. "We're merely trying to improve _your_ creations, make them better than you ever could. You just don't want us tampering with what you made."

"And _you_ just want to continue your silly vendetta with me and will stoop to any means necessary!"

"Both of you, stop," Admiral Stanforth ordered. "I should have known

it was a bad idea to put the two of you in the same room. Let's not forget who the real enemy is here. Now, we obviously won't know for a while rather or not this will work as intended, but I think that with the current situation, we need to act on this now more than ever. Until we find out if we have succeeded, however, there is nothing else we can do. In the meantime, Doctor, I believe you have some packing to do as well, and all of you have other places where you can be more useful. Dismissed."

One by one, they filed quietly from the room. Dr. Halsey exited last, slowly gathering her papers and leaving her final words to echo softly. "She's just too green."

2. Green with Envy

Chapter 2: Green with Envy

Once Kelly had checked in on the Commonwealth, she was miraculously left alone. Knowing that others would know where to find her if they needed her and as she hadn't been given any orders, she sat down with a handheld datapad and began to access the ship's logs, bypassing any walls in her way. Curious, she came to the crew roster. There weren't as many troops on board as the woman had led her to believe. In fact, there were only about thirty, not even enough for a proper platoon. When she tried to access their files, there was more redacted information than there was legible, and Kelly was surprised to find that no matter how hard she tried, even she couldn't remove the digital ink.

Almost ten hours later, Kelly was nearly bored to tears when she heard the ship-wide collision alarm sound. Panicked, she grabbed onto the bunk frame and built into the wall. After twenty seconds passed and nothing happened, she reluctantly let go and opened the door to the passageway. It was filled with soldiers running and yelling to each other, and the red lights flashed, warning everyone that the Commonwealth was under attack. Wanting to know what was going on, Kelly started pushing her way through the soldiers to get to the bridge. The deck shook under her as the sounds of something hitting the ship echoed. She was almost there when the lights dimmed, and thumps reverberated through the hull: the MAC cannon. So something serious was going on. What Insurrectionists were doing all the way out here by Chi Ceti 4 was beyond Kelly. By the time she reached the bridge, the corridors were nearly empty as all of the normal crew was at their battle stations. The heavy doors to the bridge were closed, and a young man stood in front of it, rifle held loosely.

His grip tightened as she approached. "No one's allowed on the bridge now," he told her.

"What's going on?" Kelly demanded, trying to sound more important than she was.

His face tightened. "The Covenant. They're out here, god knows why, and they've seen fit to attack us."

"The Covenant?" she asked, figuring it was some kind of Insurrectionist ship.

The soldier looked surprised. "You don't know what the Covenant is?"

And you're the ONI agent, right?"

Kelly knew he was mocking her position and lack of knowledge combined, but she refused to let him know. "Which is why I order you to tell me what's going on."

He shook his head, rejecting her attempt. "Look, non-essential personnel is required to be out of the way while the ship is under attack, and armed in case we're boarded. Why don't you go back to your bunk and snoop into whatever classified information you like while we work on killing these bastards? Get your gun out too. No shots unless we're actually boarded though. Rules are rules."

Kelly started to protest, but he stood his ground, and she had no choice but to turn around and meekly go back to her bunk. For the next hour, she researched every shred of information she could find about the Covenant, pulling out all the stops to get into ONI's databases. She couldn't believe everything she read, however. There was no way Harvest was gone. It was impossible that these aliens would have the firepower to destroy an entire planet. Even after yet another hour, though, the battle was still going, leaving her to wonder if it was, in fact, true. It seemed that the _Commonwealth_ and the Covenant ship were fairly evenly matched, at least. Unless the _Commonwealth_ had simply run. That was possible. Kelly didn't have the space experience that she could tell when the ship changed course. It would certainly explain why the ship hadn't been destroyed yet if the rumors _were_ true.

There was suddenly a banging on the door. Kelly quickly crossed the room, hoping it was someone telling her she was allowed to leave the room and find out what was going on. A woman a few years older than her stood there, excited expression on her face. "Come on," she exclaimed. "The Spartans are going after the Covenant ship, you can see 'em on the viewscreens! The Captain said we could come round everybody up, figured maybe if we all saw, we'd gain a little more respect for our guests, as it were."

"Spartans?" Kelly asked, but the woman just grabbed her wrist and pulled her out the door. There was a crowd silently gathered in one of the common areas around the viewscreen, but the woman threw her elbows around enough to shove through so the two women could see.

The screen showed an odd, oval-shaped purple ship drifting in space. There were a bunch of dots moving towards it, and someone on the bridge must have controlled the screen, for it zoomed in on the dots. They were these alien-looking creatures, clad entirely in greenish armor. "Is that the Covenant?" Kelly whispered.

The woman shook her head, letting out a snort of laughter. "No, those are the Spartans."

"Spartans?" Kelly tried to ask again, but the woman shushed her.

Three of the "Spartans" managed to get aboard the ship. The crowd stood in nervous silence for five, ten, fifteen long minutes. Finally, two reappeared and quickly pushed off of the Covenant ship, flying in zero gravity. Seconds later, a purple explosion bloomed in the center of the enemy ship. The room was filled with cheers and

yelling as it listed to one side and began to be pulled down into Chi Ceti 4's gravity. A grin broke out across Kelly's face as the woman next to her yelled in excitement and punched her on the arm. As Kelly unconsciously rubbed the arm, she continued staring at the Spartans on the screen. Three of them had destroyed an entire ship filled with the apparently fearsome Covenant. Just three of them. They did so much goodâ€¦ They looked so strong, too, gliding in space before a Longsword was sent out to pick them up. A sense of awe filled Kelly as she watched. _Maybe_, she thought to herself, _just maybe, one day I can be like that too_.

3. Olive Green

Chapter 3: Olive Green

Master Chief Spartan John-117 sat on his bunk and stared down at the dog tags in his gauntleted hands. The room around him was strangely silent, but rather it was out of sorrow for having barely completed their mission, respect for John mourning his best friend, or merely because the others were all trying out the com systems on their new armor, he wasn't sure. Probably a combination of the three. Though his focus was on the dog tags, his peripheral vision was filled with a shiny, olive green color. As he had orderedâ€”or at least, strongly suggestedâ€”every Spartan was still encased in their suit of MJOLNIR, trying to get used to it. There was no time on the battlefield for adjusting. John looked up for a second, surveying his team. Even with their faces and bodies completely covered, he could tell who each armored giant was. Linda sat on the floor, sniper rifle and attachments spread around her as she synced each to her armor's targeting systems. Isaac, Anthony, Vinh, Joshua, and Grace were all sleeping. Several Spartans watched as Fred and Will sparred in the far corner of the room. John registered movement out of the corner of his eyes and glanced over to see Kelly turning to face the fighters. She must have made use of the new coms, because a moment later the group with the fighters all silently filed out of the room.

John returned his gaze to the dog tags, feeling a wave of guilt washing over him. This was his fault. Yes, they'd destroyed the Covenant ship, but Sam had been lost with it. John should've been able to save him. Maybe he wasn't ready to lead. This was the first mission he'd led that they had ever lost someone. It shouldn't have happened in the first place.

"Is there anything I can do, Chief?" Kelly asked from across the room. John looked over at her, head cocked silently. Kelly nodded. "Single-link," she explained. "We can speak freely. So, Chief. _Is_ there anything I can do?"

Kelly sounded almost gentle. It was a tone of voice John had never heard from her. He gripped the dog tags as tightly as he dared without breaking them. "Not unless you can bring back the dead," he replied darkly.

"Chief, I may be good, but I'm not that good," she admitted.

"Then no," John replied shortly. "There _isn't_ anything you can do."

In a flash, Kelly was at his side, standing over him. "Don't be like

that with me," she ordered, and John finally picked up on the stress that had been in her voice. She was just as hurt by Sam's death as he was, she just showed it differently. "Sam was my friend too. Don't pretend that I don't understand your pain. Because I do, alright? I do."

John hesitated, unsure how to comfort her. "Kellyâ€|"

"What, _John_?" she asked, using his name as almost an insult. He paused again, knowing he had to say something but not sure what to say. Before he had a chance to try, Kelly drew in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I just feel like I'm a step away from completely losing it, you know? Sam was my first friend. I can't believe he's gone. I should've saved him, I could've come up with something, I-."

John stood so he was on the same level as her. "Kelly, stop," he ordered. "There isn't anything you could have done. There isn't anything _any_ of us could have done."

Kelly's voice shook. "But I just can't believe he's gone," she whispered. "He can't be gone. Not Sam. Johnâ€|"

It was a plea for help, but he didn't know how to aid her. Choking back a sob, Kelly leaned forward, her helmet hitting the shoulder of his armor with a gentle thud. John cautiously reached out his other hand to set it on her arm. He knew exactly how she felt. Hell, the only reason he hadn't fallen apart was because she needed help. Having someone else to take care of made him focus, brought him back from the dark place in which he had been. Linda glanced up at them, but John barely shook his head and she turned back to her sniper rifle. Kelly and John stood there for a moment, just taking comfort in the other's presence. The door slid open, interrupting them. Kelly hurriedly pulled back from John, but not before the intruder saw them together.

The young woman's eyes widened, and she got a look of confusion on her face. "Ohâ€|is this a bad time?" she asked.

John shook his head, turning to face her. Kelly moved back and to the right, silently backing him up. The woman waited for John to actually say something, but after an awkward silence, she spoke up. "I'm Lieutenant Kelly Martin, the ONI agent assigned to your unit." She held out a hand to shake.

"Master Chief Spartan 117," John politely introduced himself, carefully shaking the offered hand.

"It's an honor to meet you Chief," the lieutenant said, eyes glowing in awe. "I saw your team's feat with the Covenant ship. Most would have thought it impossible, but you did it. You must be proud of your team."

She beamed, but hidden inside his armor, John's heart sank. Proud? More like guilty. His best friend had died aboard that ship, and everyone here was treating it as a victory. As if Sam hadn't died. John felt rather than heard Kelly shift behind him, ready to chew out the lieutenant, rank or no. John held out his hand behind him and the female Spartan, as per training, froze. He merely silently nodded his thanks, and the lieutenant practically ran from the room, having

nothing else to say and feeling out of place.

The second the door closed behind her, Grace, Isaac, Anthony, Joshua, and Vinh all came over towards John and Kelly. "ONI agent?" Grace questioned. "Why are they attaching us to an ONI agent?"

Vinh, whose datapad had been out since the lieutenant had introduced herself, showed it to the others. "Look at this," she exclaimed angrily, flicking the screen. It cracked, and she sighed. "Sorry Chief. Seriously though. Look at this. No field experience, no missions, even mediocre training scores. She's the type to take her desk into battle. I bet she can't even lift a gun."

"She's fucking green," Anthony complained.

Kelly, looking over John's shoulder, agreed. "She'll only slow us down on the ship."

Grace peered at the screen, trying to find a redeeming quality in the agent. "Look here though. Off the chart scores in linguistics. And her computer skills are better than yours, Vinh."

The Spartan in question laughed mockingly. "I'd like to see that," she said.

"She has excellent code breaking skills too," Isaac pointed out.

"An AI can do all of that, and she'll get killed if we go into the field!" Kelly exclaimed.

John ignored her second point. "Yes, but we don't have an AI," he pointed out fairly. "Let's wait and see her in action before anyone passes judgment on her. Maybe there's more to her than her file suggests."

The panel on the wall beeped, reporting an incoming summons for John to the bridge. He left their barracks, but despite his nonjudgmental words about the lieutenant, his thoughts echoed Kelly's. She'll only slow us down.

4. Eat Your Greens

Chapter 4: Eat Your Greens

Three days after Lieutenant Kelly Martin first met with the Spartans, she was sitting in the Commonwealth's mess hall eating lunch with some of the other women aboard the ship. It was nice having someone to talk to; she missed having her sister around nearly all the time to gossip with. She hadn't talked to the Spartans at all since that first time, feeling too embarrassed and awkward to just approach them again without a reason. The Master Chief had made it seem as though every moment she spent talking to them was a moment wasted.

Lisa, the woman who had pulled Kelly from her room to watch the Spartans' victory over the Covenant ship, had just as quickly pulled Kelly into her group of friends. There were just the three of them today—"Lisa, Kelly, and Maggie, one of Lisa's friends"—but they were all preoccupied, lost in their own thoughts. Kelly finally broke the silence, sharing what she'd been thinking. "Don't tell anyone I

told you this, but I've figured out ONI's biggest secret," she said softly, leaning towards Lisa and Maggie.

Lisa rolled her eyes, figuring Kelly was joking, but Maggie put down her fork and leaned closer to hear. "What is it?" she asked, hungry as always for information.

"The Spartans," Kelly whispered. "They're not human. They're robots created by ONI to boost humanity's morale. I mean, think about it. Have you ever seen them eat? Have you ever seen them without their armor? When I went and talked to them, the leader spoke as little as possible. Maybe they aren't programmed with enough knowledge to speak clearly. Maybe they're just AIs with robotic bodies. Maybe-."

"They're sitting right over there," Lisa interrupted dryly. "Kelly, the reason you think you've never seen them without their armor is that you don't know what they look like outside of it. Therefore, you could see them every day and not know that they're Spartans. And for the record, they do eat. They're here every meal, because they don't ever know when they're going to get another one. Although the quiet thing," she shrugged, "they do just keep to themselves. Anyone who's not a Spartan will only slow them down, in their eyes. They're able, willing, and perfectly happy to die so the rest of our sorry asses can live."

"So says Halsey's assistant," Maggie pointed out. "Which means you probably know them better than almost everyone else on this ship."

"Except Halsey herself," Lisa countered. "I don't know how far back she goes with the program, but the way she treats them and the way they respect and listen to her, you'd think she was their mother."

"Okay, wait," Kelly interrupted. "Halsey is the one who works with the Spartans?" Lisa nodded. "And you work with her. So who in here is a Spartan? How are the rest of us supposed to know?"

"Kelly, look around," Lisa instructed dryly. "If anyone in here is over seven feet tall and looks like they can lift a bus, they're probably a Spartan."

"That table over there," Maggie interpreted, stealthily pointing across the room.

Kelly glanced over, but the people seated there seemed just as unfamiliar as the rest of the crew. Who were the Spartans she had seen when she had visited their barracks? "Do you know their names?" she asked Lisa.

The woman nodded. "Okay, starting in the corner closest to us and going clockwise, we have Maria-062, Joshua-029â€¦" Lisa continued for about thirty names, but Kelly knew there was no way she would remember all of that. Maggie was clearly not paying attention too, merely staring at the Spartans, eyes not focusing on any of them. Lisa snapped her fingers in front of Maggie's face. "Hey, didn't your mother ever tell you that it's rude to stare?" Maggie rolled her eyes and focused on her plate of food instead. "Anyway, the one farthest away from us is 117. No one knows his real name. The Spartans just

call him the Master Chief, so everyone else does too. The woman next to him is Kelly-087."

"Hey Kelly, you're a Spartan now," Maggie teased.

"She's his new second in command after Sam died on the Covenant ship," Lisa finished.

"One of them _died_?" her friend asked in surprise, all laughter gone from her voice.

Lisa nodded. "Yup. I didn't think it was possible either."

Kelly looked back over at the Spartans' table, picking out the one Lisa had said was called the Master Chief. He looked almost nice, for a Spartan. His face and arms were covered in scars, but those surrounding him were the same way. They all did look rather similar, Kelly supposed. They were all covered in muscles and scars, and all had hair that looked recently buzzed, even the women. They all seemed to have a certain grace about them too, even though they were just eating. The only thing that seemed to make the Master Chief stand out was how he seemed to be in control. Kelly didn't know what he was in control of, but he just exuded this aura of confidence and calm. As the woman stared, the female Spartan—the one with her name, Kelly remembered—next to the Master Chief nudged him and nodded in Kelly's direction. The man looked up and across the room at her, eyes meeting hers for a moment.

"Shit, don't stare!" Lisa exclaimed softly. "Did neither of you have a mother? Quit staring and eat your greens," she ordered.

Kelly complied, but she felt eyes watching her as she did so. After what felt like a few minutes but was probably much less than that, she risked a glance back up—only to see the Spartan looking away, shaking his head slightly. _What? Why?_ Kelly wondered. What had she done wrong? Maybe he just looked down on her because she wasn't a Spartan? Or maybe she was just misinterpreting the whole thing. No matter why, though, Kelly didn't believe that she was seeing things wrong. She had a feeling that for whatever reason, the Master Chief didn't like her, and he _definitely_ didn't like her being attached to his team.

5. GreenEyed Monster

Chapter 5: Green-Eyed Monster

Spartan Kelly-087 was in the barracks, sparring with no one and thinking. The constant, almost dance-like movement helped her think, and unfortunately, she had plenty to think about. The ONI agent attached to them was the source of her problems. Lieutenant Kelly Martin. Maybe Kelly just had issues, but she felt just a little indignant that this other Kelly had stolen her name. The Spartan knew it was a completely ridiculous thing to upset her, but it did. Beyond that, she couldn't tell what bothered her more about the woman: her inability to fight or the skills she had that may actually prove useful. Kelly squinted as she spun in a circle, expecting her hair to hit her in the face. It didn't, and the abnormality in the pattern threw her off for a moment. All of the Spartans had been given buzz cuts in order for their MJOLNIR helmets to fit properly. It suited

some more than others. Fred, for example, looked even more attractive than usual. Linda, on the other end of the spectrum, did not. Her bright red hair, cut so short, simply made her look as though her scalp had been burnt. John was in the middle. His hair was always buzzed, and he looked just as handsome as ever.

Kelly couldn't help sighing as she thought of her best friend and leader. She would follow John anywhere, even to death itself if he asked that of her. She would give her life for his in an instant. She trusted him more than she had ever trusted anyone else, and she knew that he was the right one to lead the Spartans. He had been one of her first friends, and he still was her best friend. As much as she hated to admit it to herself though, there was more to her relationship with John than that. Kellyâ€¦ _cared_ for John, more than she should as a Spartan. Spartans weren't supposed to love; they weren't supposed to get involved in relationships. Kelly didn't know if her feelings for John went as far as love, but there was definitely more there than just friendship and trust.

Maybe that was where her dislike of the ONI agent stemmed from. Was it that she was afraid the lieutenant would take her place as John's necessary right hand? Kelly rolled her eyes. There was no way that could happenâ€¦ but maybe she did feel a _little_ threatened by the other woman.

As though summoned by her thoughts, the door slid open to reveal the lieutenant. Kelly made a show of throwing the knives she'd been practicing with into her mattress before turning to the woman. "Can I help you?" she asked, trying to be civil.

Apparently this meant more to the one Kelly than it did to the other. The lieutenant smiled brightly, encouraged by Kelly's "friendliness." "Yeah, is the Master Chief here?" she questioned, glancing around the room.

Kelly tried to keep from sighing. Obviously John was not here, as Kelly was alone in the large barracks. "No, sorry. Do you want me to pass on a message?"

"Just tell him I have an offer about some intel he may be interested in," the lieutenant said, turning to leave.

The way she said it, as though Kelly had no right to know, bothered the Spartan immensely. She tried to stop the words that came out of her mouth, but she'd always been impulsive, and it was too late. "He doesn't like you," she blurted out. "Joâ€¦the Master Chief. He thinks you're just going to slow us down and get yourself killed." Kelly grimaced and bit her lip. John hadn't exactly said that, but he'd obviously been thinking it.

The lieutenant tried not to let the surprise and hurt show on her face. "Thank you," she told Kelly shortly before walking out.

As soon as she was alone again, Kelly sighed and went to retrieve her knives. Damn. She really hadn't meant to say thatâ€¦ John would probably be upset when he found out. _If_ he found out. But no, the tattletale of a spook would probably tell him, or someone else who would then tell John. Either way, Kelly was going to have to find a way to explain herself.

She shook her head and began her practice again. Maybe this time she could think of something a little less bothersome than the lieutenant.

6. Glow Green

Chapter 6: Glow Green

John-117 hesitated outside the door of Lieutenant Kelly Martin's bunk. He wouldn't have even paused under most circumstances, but Kelly-087 had been strangely vague when she told him the ONI agent wanted to speak to him. She could offer no clarification as to why the other Kelly wanted him, either, which was why John was hesitant to seek her out and ask. It was probably something silly, like that she wanted him to make his team like her or some such nonsense. Maybe that was a little too childish of a thing for him to assume she wanted, but with as green as she was— Well, honestly, there was no telling.

John steeled himself and raised his hand to knock. A second before his knuckles hit the door, though, raised voices came from the room. "No, Beowulf, I— that's not even possible!" Kelly's voice came muffled through the door. "There is no way I'm submitting that piece of shit translation in my report! You're trying to get me fired!" John started to turn away, planning to come back later, but then sighed and knocked before he could talk himself out of it. "Who is it?" Kelly yelled, voice sounding strained.

"Master Chief, Spartan 117, reporting as ordered," John replied loudly enough that she could hear.

The door slid open to reveal Kelly. She looked more stressed out than John had ever seen her. It was interesting, getting to see a different side of her than the perfect, unemotional ONI agent. "Oh, it's you," she said bluntly, stepping back into her room.

John followed, noting the slight mess on the floor, the useless green lighting from the computer, and the screen itself, which was split into four sections. One showed a document with some text on it, one showed a series of symbols that John recognized as from the Covenant, and the others held the avatars of two AIs. "Is this a bad time?" John asked. "I can come back later."

Kelly shook her head. "No, now's as good a time as any. I could use a break."

"Oh yes, a break from your backbreaking work," the male AI said snippily.

"Shove it, Beowulf," Kelly snapped. "I'm through taking your shit. You're just pissed that you need my help at all. Mute: Beowulf," she ordered, and the computer complied, recognizing her voice. The AI's eyes narrowed and he began furiously signing with his hands. Kelly lifted one finger in her own sign language response, and turned the monitor so it was facing away from her and John.

The Spartan hid his surprise well. He really was seeing a different side of the agent than she'd ever given him thought to even consider. "Is everything alright?" he asked, tone of voice carefully

neutral.

Kelly laughed darkly. "Oh yeah. Everything's great. ONI's teaming up AIs across the galaxy with their best linguists, all of us racing to come up with the most accurate translation of the Covenant languages. Once we all report inâ€"in just seventy-two hours, mind youâ€"they're going to compile our results and figure things out from there. And out of all of the AIs in the galaxy, I was the linguist lucky enough to get stuck with Beowulf. That rat bastard," she grimaced. "But I shouldn't be complaining to you. I'm sure you have more important things to do than hear me rant. And I shouldn't be. At least I'm finally doing something more useful than pissing people off and getting in the way." Kelly glared at John, challenging him to say something.

"I don't mind," John told her, and was surprised to find that he wasn't lying. There was an awkward pause before he filled it. "Kelly said you wanted to see me?"

The human Kelly let out a bark of laughter. "Ha. Yeah, but that's okay. I know I'm just in your way. I was going to offer to help, but I'm sure you don't need my help. Me, ONI's greenest agent."

John blinked in surprise. Where had that come from? He hadn't said anything negative to her or about her, so why was she jumping down his throat? "What?" he asked finally.

"Kelly told me what you said," she explained bluntly. "About how you don't need me or want me because I'm too green and will just get killed. Can't say I blame you. You're not the only one that thinks that. I shouldn't be taking it out on you, I apologize."

John frowned. "I didn't say that," he informed her. "I don't know why Kelly told you that, but I never said that."

"I'm sure you were thinking it," the lieutenant said bitterly, before sinking down on her bunk and sighing. "I'm sorry. Again, I shouldn't be taking this out on you."

John had the urge to sit next to her and comfort her, but he resisted it, unsure as to where it had even come from. "It's okay. I can tell you're under a lot of stress. â€|Did you want to ask me something?" he asked, trying to sound gentle.

Kelly straightened and composed herself. "Yes, actually. As I'm doing all of this translating, I was wondering if it might be useful for your Spartans to know a few of the Covenant's basic symbols, considering you might run into them in the field." She stood again. "If you're interested, I can teach you guys."

John raised his eyebrows, contemplating. "You know, that's actually a good idea," he said thoughtfully. "I think that would be good. You wouldn't mind doing that?"

Kelly smiled slightly. "Not at all. Just let me finish my seventy-two hours before I start."

John nodded, and offered the agent a rare smile. She hesitantly grinned back, glad that he had gone along with her idea and grateful

that they were getting along. "Thank you," he said, meaning the words.

"No problem," Kelly replied seriously. "I'm happy to help in any way that I can."

John saluted, and once Kelly had returned it, left. His opinion of the lieutenant had been transformed in just the past ten minutes. There was more to her than he'd seen before. Maybe she wouldn't slow them down after all. Maybe what the Spartans had all written off as a nuisance would, in time, become one of their greatest assets.

7. Naturally Green

Chapter 7: Naturally Green

Lieutenant Kelly Martin was in the ship's gym, which—she was ashamed to admit—was unusual for her. Her company was every bit as planned as her location: she was entirely alone. Somewhere in the nearly sleepless seventy-two hours that she'd been translating for ONI, the thought had spawned in her mind that it might feel good to get some exercise. After sleeping the better part of the previous day, working her muscles sounded even better. Attempting to teach the Spartans some of the Covenant's language that morning had only strengthened the ONI agent's resolve. They were so strong, so confident in themselves. Kelly envied that about them as much as she envied their selflessness and usefulness. She knew it was a long shot made by a desperate woman lacking self-confidence, but maybe if she just started down that path, the rest would fall into place.

The machines looked frighteningly complex. For a moment, Kelly wished that she had given in to the part of her that suggested she ask Lisa to accompany her. She knew the other woman wouldn't mind, but Kelly felt too self-conscious for that. She didn't want Lisa to witness first hand Kelly's lack of muscles. Hesitantly, the lieutenant stepped over to the one thing she recognized from her short basic training: the bench press. She put two of the smallest weights on the bar, balancing it out before laying flat on the bench. Her fears were confirmed; the bar wouldn't budge. It didn't even roll forward just a bit, instead stubbornly sitting in place. Kelly glared at it for a moment before standing and taking off the weights. Feeling stupid, she tried again. This time, the bar at least moved. She felt like she was doing something wrong, but her arms felt like they were getting much-needed work. _One, two, three, four_, Kelly counted off in her head. Around eight, her arms started to get tired. At eleven, they were shaking. When she lowered the bar for thirteen, she couldn't lift it back up. Kelly panicked, knowing that there was absolutely no one else around. She physically could not move the bar, and a fifty-pound bar dropping on her neck could kill her. Was she really going to be killed because of her own stupidity? She struggled to push the bar back up, trying to will more strength into her arms, but they only shook and sank a little lower. She opened her mouth to scream for help—embarrassed Kelly was better than dead Kelly—but strong hands gripped the bar and gently lifted it out of her way.

Kelly flinched in surprise, looking up to see the Master Chief as her arms fell uselessly to her sides. "Thank you," she murmured, embarrassed. _Of course it would have to be someone whose opinion of

her mattered most that rescued her_.

The Spartan nodded. "No problem," he replied, moving over towards the bench press next to her. Kelly watched as he loaded on weights. Sighing, she lay back down on her bench, looking up at the ceiling. "You know," the Master Chief grunted between reps, "you should really have a spotter when you're doing stuff like that."

"You don't have one," Kelly retorted. It wasn't fair that he didn't have to have someone to help him and she did.

"That's because I know my limits," he replied. "You clearly don't."

Kelly's eyes narrowed, but she kept herself from jumping down his throat. "No, I guess I don't," she admitted instead. "It's been a while since I did this."

There was a metallic clang as the Spartan set the bar back on the rack. "I figured as much," he said, breathing a little harder than usual. "No offense. You just have no need to in your line of work."

"Yeah," Kelly mumbled. "I fly a desk."

"And there's nothing wrong with that," he told her. "We need linguists and code hackers every bit as much as soldiers." After resting for a moment, he picked up the bar again. "It's better for you to do them in sets," the Master Chief informed Kelly. "Take a moment in between ten or so."

The lieutenant sighed. Just another area where she'd screwed up. "How long did you work before you could lift that much?" she asked, changing the subject.

He let out a short bark of laughter. "I added over one-fifty pounds almost overnight."

Kelly glanced sideways at him. The veins in his arms stood out as his muscles worked, pushing the bar upwards. She couldn't see his face, there were so many oversized weights in the way. "What?" she asked, confused.

"They worked us as hard as they could until we were fourteen," the Master Chief explained. "Then they operated on us. Turned us into supersoldiers. Like I said, almost overnight. We weren't allowed back in the gym for another week, though, so I can't tell you exactly how soon it all started taking effect."

"Wow," Kelly murmured, barely aware that she had spoken aloud. The UNSC had operated on fourteen-year-olds? How many people knew this? And where had they even gotten the would-be-Spartans from anyway? "Your parents must be proud of you," she ventured, testing the waters.

"I wouldn't know," he replied. "I haven't seen them since I was six. They're probably still on Eridanus II, and last I heard, the Covenant's making that a target."

Kelly was momentarily stunned. "Iâ€¦ I'm sorry," she said softly.

"I barely even remember them," the Spartan said matter-of-factly. "The only thing I really remember is how green the planet was. This beautiful, natural green. I used to remember my mother's voice, but that's faded over the years."

There was silence for a long minute. Kelly didn't know what to say. She stood. "Well, I'll be going now," she finally said, rising and heading towards the door.

"Lieutenant." Kelly paused and turned back towards the Master Chief. He placed the bar back in its rack and looked up at her. "If you really want to get better at this, I could help you."

"Oh, I couldn't," the lieutenant protested, embarrassed. "I mean, you're so busy with, well, everything, I mean, I don't want to take any of your time-."

"You're teaching my Spartans Covenant symbols that could determine life or death for them in the field," he said simply. "It's the least I can do."

Kelly finally understood what he was trying to do. He was extending the hand of friendship to her. She could take it and, while being supremely embarrassed, have a potential ally among the Spartans and in time, maybe even become stronger. Or she could refuse it and stay where she was. "Okay," Kelly agreed. "Yeah, sure. I'd like that." She smiled hesitantly. The Master Chief returned her smile, and Kelly nodded and left before she could get herself into any more awkward situations.

8. Dirty Warthog Green

Chapter 8:

Dirty Warthog Green:

The Warthog's wheels spun uselessly in the air for a moment before the vehicle bounced to the ground. The shocks helped cushion most of the blow, but John's teeth still jarred together. He tasted blood in his mouth. "Wheels down, wheels down, wheels down," he heard Kelly-087 pray fervently as her dirt-covered Warthog followed his over the broken stretch of road. John glanced over his shoulder to see the vehicle bounce and land upright, wheels squealing as they tried to find traction. "Fuck yeah!" Kelly exclaimed, running down a pair of Jackals that had dodged John's Warthog.

The Spartans were back on the ground, and despite the reason, John was happy to be there. Time on the ground was infinitely better than time on a ship, in spite of risking his life during nearly every moment of real gravity. The super soldiers were divided into two teams, red and blue. Red team was searching the Covenant-held city of NAME HERE for survivors while Blue team was to disable the Scarab so a Pelican could land. Kelly-087 had complained and made snide jokes for a week once she'd found out the green Lieutenant Martin was being brought to the planet, but even she couldn't deny that the lieutenant was necessary this time. At the heart of Blue team's mission was a meteor that had landed on the obscure planet in 2510. The strange writing it was covered in had been a mystery at the time, but now the

Spartans were sent to either destroy the rock and the Covenant mysteries of which they assumed it told or save a part of it. No one knew what was written on the stone, but it was imperative that it didn't fall into Covenant hands. That was where Lieutenant Martin came in. The Spartans needed her help to determine whether or not a fraction should be spared before blowing the rock to hell and keeping the Covenant from getting what they wanted. Kelly-087 had suggested using live video feeds to show the lieutenant the huge rock, but John didn't want to risk the Covenant intercepting the transmission and finding out that humanity had learned their language.

The Warthogs screeched to a halt near the designated location, and Blue team leaped out, guns blazing. Once they had cleared the outer area of Covenant forces, they quickly moved inside the building surrounding the meteor. Once Will had gunned down the last Elite, Grace started placing explosives on the rock and John radioed the waiting Pelican. "LZ is clear. You are go for landing, I repeat, go for landing."

A black speck in the sky banked towards their location and quickly descended. It hovered for a moment, whipping up dust as the hatch opened and half a dozen Marines jumped out, followed by Lieutenant Kelly Martin. She looked strange in the body armor that marked her as an ONI agent. Her fear was obvious on her face, but she seemed determined to hide it. Kelly-087 saw it too. "Oh Lord..." she muttered over a private channel with John.

"Blue-2, cut the unnecessary talk and focus on the mission," he ordered, not in the mood for her complaints. His second sighed and leaned against a wall, arms crossed. John almost told her to grow up and prepare for action, but instead just ignored her. He walked over to where the other Kelly stood by the meteor, her fingers tracing symbols and mouthing words. She was so focused she barely avoided running into Grace, who was crouched at the base of the rock. "Well, Lieutenant?" John prompted after a moment. "What do you think?"

"If only there was a way," Kelly murmured to herself before turning to John. "Save at least a portion of this. It may be one of the UNSC's most important finds yet. Trust me."

Her deadly serious tone of voice surprised and worried John. "What does it say?" he asked. "Can you read it?"

She shook her head. "No. It's not Covenant. It's similar... but it's not close enough that I can interpret it. It seems almost... older. The calligraphy is cleaner, more... It feels almost... familiar..."

"Lieutenant, we need to get moving," John reminded her.

Kelly shook her head, getting back on track. "Right. Save a portion of it, though."

John nodded to Grace, who moved a few of the charges before stepping back. The rest of the group moved into the building before Grace detonated the explosives. Dust and small chunks rained down. When the air cleared, one large portion of the meteor remained. "Not bad," Grace said cheerfully.

"Good work, Blue-5," John agreed before switching com channels.

"Pelican, you are clear to land again. We have a rock for you to take back to the Commonwealth with Lieutenant Martin. Blue team and Marines, the Pelican will be dropping off another Warthog and we can rendezvous with Red-."

"Negative, Chief," the pilot cut into the transmission. "We have a Covie ship up here raining hell on the Commonwealth. We won't be able to dock with them for a while, they're busy evading so we have a ship to escape to. There's a swarm of Banshees between them and us too."

"Copy," John replied before changing the com again. "Red-1, what's the status of your mission? Are you ready for evac?"

Fred's voice was filled with static over the channel. "Negative, Chief. We have civilians with us and they think they know where more are hiding out. We need more time."

"How long?" John asked.

There was a pause. "They think twenty minutes. Add in Covies everywhere, I'd say an hour. Maybe more."

"Negative, Red-1. In an hour, they will have realized their objective is gone and started glassing the planet."

"Sir, I understand, but we need more time. We can't just leave them here to burn."

John sighed as he thought. Fred was right. There had to be a way. "Copy. Red-1, keep pressing towards your target, but don't take your time. We're on a tight schedule here. We'll do what we can to delay the Covenant. Blue-1 out."

"Copy," Fred replied. "Over and out."

John's mind worked furiously, frantically trying to come up with a solution. There was just one ship up there now, but in an hour there would be many more. That one ship was the source of all their problems currently... "Blue-5. How many explosives do you have left?"

Grace shook her head, holding up empty hands. "Nothing."

"You have a plan, Chief?" Will asked.

"If we had enough explosives, we could've done the same thing we did last time," John explained. "If we timed it right, we could fly the Pelican into the hangar."

"But we have no way to blow it," Anthony clarified.

"I can do it." John turned to see the lieutenant step forward. "If you can get me on board the ship, I can hack into their network and initiate a system overload."

"Are you sure?" the Chief asked. If they got up there and she couldn't do it, they were as good as dead.

Kelly nodded. "Eighty-eight percent certain. I can't promise you more

than that," she warned."

"Understood." John keyed the com. "Pelican, can you land long enough to pick us up and land us in the Covenant ship?"

"Blue-1, please repeat. Did you say the Covenant ship?"

"Yes. Can you get us there?"

"I can try, Chief, but it's gonna be damn difficult..."

"Copy that," John said quickly. "Come pick us up."

"Roger that," the pilot replied. The Pelican flew back into view and quickly descended. Isaac handed the chunk of meteor up to Will, who stowed it in a corner and tied it down while everyone else climbed aboard. John made sure everyone was there before motioning to the pilot. "Let's go. We have a job to do."

9. Green in the Face

Chapter 9: Green in the Face

Lieutenant Kelly Martin felt the Pelican's acceleration in the pit of her stomach. Where normally she loved flying, now she felt sick. She'd heard what the Covenant had done, she'd seen what it had taken to destroy the ship above Chi Ceti 4. She could see with her own eyes what they were doing on Hydra VI. It wasn't as if she was ignorant of their power. But now she was headed into the belly of the beast, and it was her idea. If she hadn't spoken up, she might not even be on this Pelican headed for hell. But she couldn't have not spoken up. Being a part of ONI and a bit of a wizard when it came to technology, she'd programmed her headset to pick up all nearby friendly channels. Kelly had heard what Red-1 had told the Master Chief, and she wanted to save those civilians if she could. She couldn't just let them die when she might have a way they could live. So Kelly had spoken up. It wasn't that she doubted her ability to overload the Covenant ship's system. She was just worried she wouldn't lie long enough to even get there.

As if in response to her frightened thoughts, an explosion rocked the Pelican. The pilot banked the ship, and the lieutenant was thrown against the straps restraining her. Kelly gritted her teeth and forced her attention anywhere but at her fears. Her eyes latched onto the Spartans. In their armor, it was almost impossible to tell them apart, but their friend-or-foe tags that appeared on Kelly's eyescreen identified them. All six of them remained nearly motionless in spite of the Pelican being tossed about. Kelly found her gaze drawn to the Master Chief. They'd tentatively become friends since their first encounter in the gym, or at least, they outwardly respected each other a little more. Kelly still didn't know what the Spartan thought of her. No matter the answer to that, however, he'd made good on his offer. For the past week and a half, for an hour every day, they had met in the gym and he'd coached her through a series of workouts. Kelly couldn't tell too much of a difference, but when she'd grabbed her pistol before heading to the Pelican, it hadn't seemed as hard to lift as it used to be.

She was still pretty sure that a little bit of a workout didn't

prepare her for this, though. Although calling it a "little" workout was under exaggerating. The second day, when her entire body felt like one massive bruise, the Master Chief had forced her to keep going past her breaking point. Kelly knew that was what drill instructors had taught him and everyone else, but she had been nearly crying in anger and pain by the time her hour was up. The next day, still mad, she had gone into the gym when she knew the Spartan was working out, planning to give him trouble for going harder on her than on himself. Instead, she'd found him covered in sweat, muscles shaking as he tried to bench more weights than Kelly had ever seen on a single bar. Kelly-087 was behind him, spotting, and her eyes had met the lieutenant's for a moment. The human's eyes had glanced at the Master Chief for a second, then back. The female Spartan had nodded seriously. There was a man that deserved the respect of both of them. Kelly-087's attention was drawn away as the Master Chief set the bar back down, and Lieutenant Kelly Martin had silently slunk out, furious speech forgotten. The Spartan had looked almost angry as he had pushed himself. Kelly wanted to know why, so she'd been a good little spook and hacked his file. The only solid information she could find was his age. The rest was redacted so much so that she couldn't get through an entire sentence.

The Pelican rocked violently, snapping Kelly out of her thoughts. She realized with embarrassment that she had been openly staring at the Master Chief. He was facing her, but whether or not he had caught her staring, she didn't know. It would be so much easier if she could just see his face...

Kelly forced herself to look away. "ETA Covenant cruiser is ten minutes," the pilot yelled.

"Roger that," the Master Chief acknowledged before issuing orders. "Blue-3, Blue-6, and Marines, I want you to stay with the Pelican and the pilot once we land. That's our ticket out of here. If the Covenant destroys it, we're not going to be leaving their ship. Blue-2, Blue-4, Blue-5, and I will accompany Lieutenant Martin to where she needs to be. Be prepared to receive heavy fire as soon as we board."

"I radioed the Commonwealth and asked them to send out all their single ship fighters to distract the Covies, but they'll still probably see us and know we're coming," the pilot cut in.

The Master Chief nodded. "Acknowledged," he said quickly.

The Pelican rocked again, and Kelly tightly gripped the seat restraints. "Damn, girl, calm down," one of the Marines teased. "You never made a hot drop before or something?"

"Look, she's all green in the face," another chuckled.

Kelly intently focused on the restraints in her hands, trying to ignore them. Yes, she was scared, of course she was. Had battle really made them so hard that they didn't fear for their lives anymore?

"How cute-," the first man started again, but the Master Chief cut him off.

"Quiet, Marine," he ordered.

The Marine raised his hands defensively. "Hey, sorry Chief, didn't mean to be picking on your little pet."

"He said shut up," one of the other Spartans said, and Kelly thought she recognized Grace's voice. Judging by the rocket launcher the Spartan was examining, Kelly was probably right. Grace glared up at the Marine. "If I were you, I'd listen to the Chief."

Wisely, the man chose not to respond. Kelly risked a small smile at the female Spartan and was rewarded with a slight head nod.

The next few minutes seemed to last a lifetime and passed in silence, save the pilot's random mutterings. "Gotta time it just right," he said quietly before yelling back to his passengers. "Be careful, it's about to get hot in here. We'll be dropping almost as soon as we get inside their shields."

"Acknowledged," the Master Chief replied.

"In three, two, one," the pilot counted down, focus overriding the Chief's response. The Pelican jumped forward, and the interior quickly grew hotter. Kelly almost sensed something passing by outside before the Pelican abruptly changed direction and dropped. "We are go for landing!" the pilot exclaimed, utilizing the ship's chin gun to mow down some of the opposition in the hangar. The ramp dropped and almost immediately, the Spartans were all outside firing. Kelly tried to follow before remembering her harness. Embarrassed and glad everyone else had left before her, she released it and ran down the ramp.

Battle was pandemonium and fear. No one had ever told her that, and nothing had prepared her for this. It was one thing to read about battles and to see pictures of the Covenant, but it was something else entirely to be a part of a battle and see the aliens in person. Shots flew everywhere, and the noise was like hell. Kelly couldn't see the bullets flying through the air, but she could hear the loud cracks the guns made as they fired. The Covenant weapons weren't as loud, but they discharged brightly colored, burning plasma at the humans. It was the size of the aliens that made Kelly freeze in terror, however. The silly looking ones with the triangles on their backs looked so small in images, but they were almost her height. The ugly ones with shields were even a little taller. Kelly didn't want to know how much bigger the others were. A plasma shot struck near her, and the lieutenant forced herself to focus past her fear. A yell alerted her to one of the little triangle ones running towards her, two blue glowing things in its paws. She instinctively backed away, firing her pistol until the clip was empty. Most of the shots missed, but a couple hit and the little alien fell to the ground. Kelly cautiously stepped forward again, but the alien's body suddenly exploded, heat and debris attacking the lieutenant. "Careful!" one of the Spartans yelled, and Kelly identified Isaac's voice. "The glowing things are grenades, and they can get stuck to you, so watch out." The Spartan fired again, moving away from Kelly. The woman nodded as she fumblingly reloaded her pistol. "Grenades. Of course." Once she finally got the clip locked into place, she turned, trying to find something else to shoot at. Instead she found the hangar silent, Spartans and Marines either reloading their weapons or scavenging the Covenant bodies that littered the floor for equipment.

Isaac approached Kelly again, and she was proud that she could tell who he was by the long scratch across his faceplate. "Do you know what any of this stuff is?" he asked her kindly.

Kelly shook her head, letting her bafflement show. "No clue," she admitted. "It all looks so different in person."

Isaac laughed briefly. "That's true, at least. Okay, well, that's called a grunt," he explained, pointing to one of the triangle-y creatures. "See the gun it's carrying? That's called a plasma pistol, and if you ever need a gun to use on the battlefield, grab one of those."

"That one?" Kelly clarified, pointing.

Isaac gently placed his gauntleted hand over hers and moved it a little to the right. "That one," he corrected. "They're really easy to use. That alien, that usually carries a shield, it's-."

"Excuse me," the Master Chief interrupted coldly, and Kelly flinched. She hadn't realized he had come over to her and Isaac. "Blue-6, this is the battlefield, not a classroom. Save it for later. You have a duty to do now. Lieutenant, so do you. Let's focus on that."

Kelly felt unfairly scolded, but before she could say anything, Isaac quickly pulled his hand away. "My fault, Chief, won't happen again."

The Master Chief nodded before motioning to Kelly. He led her towards where Blue-2, Blue-4, and Blue-5 stood waiting. "Come on. Let's get to work." The Spartan glanced back at the team guarding the Pelican before making a series of hand gestures to the Spartans with him. Kelly-087 pulled ahead, taking point, while Anthony fell back and the Master Chief and Grace stayed with the lieutenant. She felt so small, dwarfed by the giants in their otherworldly armor. The Spartan on point carefully glanced around the corner before motioning the rest of the group forward. They entered the hallway silently, and Kelly was awed by what she saw. The passageway was at least twice her height, an amazing amount of space for a ship. The walls were this purple-pink color, and the lights along the floor shone gently. There were ornate symbols on the walls, and after an approving gesture from the Master Chief, Kelly went over to examine them. After a few moments, she pointed. "That way. Their power source is in that direction, and there will most likely be somewhere between here and there where I can access the network."

"Let's go," Grace said cheerfully. Kelly-087 took point again, and the rest of the group followed her. The passageways were strangely silent, and Kelly was beginning to feel that the mission might not be so difficult after all. Four minutes on the mission clock felt like a lifetime before Kelly-087 froze ahead of them. She held up her hand, and the other Spartans halted. The lieutenant quickly followed their example and listened. Deep voices speaking the Covenant language came from around the corner. The Master Chief looked at Kelly, but she shrugged. Whoever—or whatever—was over there spoke too fast for her to be able to understand what was being said. Their leader pointed at Kelly and gestured for her to stay back. He then motioned at Anthony, Kelly-087, Grace, and himself, and counted down on his fingers. As his hand curled into a fist, the four Spartans burst around the corner. Kelly fingered her pistol nervously as shots after

shot rang out. After a few seconds, it was over and Grace came back around the corner and waved her forward. The rest of the Spartans waited ahead, and three huge aliens lay dead on the floor, purple blood spattered everywhere. Kelly bit her lip, trying not to focus on the bodies. "Hey, you okay?" Grace asked, noticing.

Kelly nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah... They just look so... inhuman. So different, you know? It's almost hard to believe they even exist," she remarked.

"Yeah, I get what you mean," Grace agreed. "These bastards have caused one hell of a lot of destruction, though. They do exist, no matter how hard it is to believe."

"I know," Kelly said softly. Then, "Hey, thanks for sticking up for me back on the Pelican."

"Don't worry about it," the Spartan replied cheerfully. "Unlike a lot of people, I can actually see past the rough green exterior and see that you'll make a great ONI agent someday. Not that you're not already," she continued hurriedly, "but you'll be great at field work."

Kelly smiled. "Thanks."

The rest of the Spartans were waiting for them ahead. "We need to hurry," the Master Chief interrupted the conversation. "Someone will have heard that and will come looking for us. We have a limited amount of time now."

Kelly-087 took the lead again, and the group moved on, this time more quickly. They reached the engine room without running into any more aliens. The room itself, however, was a different story. The cavernous chamber was littered with different Covenant species, and Kelly felt her heart sink. There was no way they could get past so many enemies.

"There." The Master Chief dropped a marker on a computer terminal at the center of the room. Anthony, Kelly-087, and Grace immediately leapt into action, firing at the aliens and clearing a path. "Stay close to me," the Chief ordered, following in the cleared path. Kelly obeyed mindlessly, firing a series of shots that missed. She stumbled backwards into him as she tried to hit a jackal that ran past on one of the higher levels. "If you can't shoot and walk, walk," the Spartan said tersely while firing.

"Sorry," Kelly murmured, lowering her gun slightly. They finally crossed the room, and Kelly practically flew to the terminal. The sooner she could get this done, the sooner they could all get out of here. The Spartans stood in a circle around her as she worked, quickly hacking into the network and doing what she needed to overload the system. "Fuck!" Kelly-087 cursed, voice cutting into the lieutenant's train of thought. "John, gimme a hand here-!" There was a loud roar behind her, and Kelly turned in fear to see one of the massive aliens slip past the Spartans and stare down at the human. Purple blood dripped from one of its sides, but it wasn't dead yet. Reacting without thinking, Kelly fired. Her first shot went wild, but after that, it was hard to miss a target so close. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Clip empty, Kelly frantically reached for another one. She didn't need to. The

creature fell to the ground, dead. Too scared to feel proud, Kelly shakily stood. "Learn to shoot," the Master Chief ordered, sounding angry.

The shock and hurt must have showed on Kelly's face, for Grace quickly cut in. "You done?" she asked.

"Done," Kelly confirmed, trying to not think about what the Chief had said.

"Let's go, Blue team," he ordered. "Run, don't clear. Let's get out of here. Lieutenant, how long until the ship blows?"

"Five minutes."

"Go." The Spartans took off, and Kelly struggled to keep up with them. Damn, they were fast. Kelly-087 took point again, practically flying ahead of the others. Skirmishes with the aliens slowed them down, but only momentarily. Soon the lieutenant was out of breath and knew she'd never be able to match their pace. Trying to force herself to run faster, Kelly tripped over one of the alien bodies littering the passageway. Her hands hit the purple-stained floor, and almost instantly one of the Spartans was there, lifting her from the ground. Whichever Spartan it was began to run again, gently cradling Kelly. They burst into the hangar to see the Pelican under fire. The other Spartans were running towards the ship, trying to evade the aliens quickly streaming in through the other doors. The pilot was starting up their ship, and the Spartans raced up the ramp as it quickly closed and the Pelican lifted off the ground. The Spartan carrying Kelly carefully set her down and moved towards the cockpit. "Let's go," the Master Chief ordered. The pilot nodded, and as the Pelican sped out of the hangar, the Spartan moved to take a seat. Kelly, having strapped herself in, glanced towards him, wanting to thank him, but his harsh words after she had killed the big alien stopped her. So much for them becoming friends. He was probably annoyed that she'd slowed them down.

The countdown timer on Kelly's eyescreen ticked down to zero, and a series of huge explosions could be felt. The Pelican was tossed about, but managed to safely speed back towards the Commonwealth. Kelly was deposited in the ship's hangar, and the Pelican returned to Hydra VI. After the part that she had played, the lieutenant was allowed to stay on the bridge and watch as, with the time that she and the Spartans had bought them, the Pelicans were able to land, pick up Red team and the civilians, and safely return to the Covenant. For once, Kelly couldn't help feeling proud as the Commonwealth transitioned into Slipstream Space. Lives had been saved, and the green agent had played a role in it for once. Maybe Grace was right. Maybe she would prove to be a good agent someday.

10. Jealously Green

Chapter 10:

Spartan Kelly-087 was looking for someone. In specific, she was looking for John. She felt like she should apologize for her performance during their last mission. She had spoken out of turn against Lieutenant Martin and then had failed to protect her when it

had mattered most. Kelly knew she was better than that, and she didn't want John to think she was falling short. She felt like she needed to apologize.

Kelly didn't have to look long. John was in the mess hall, sitting by himself and thinking. Where Kelly normally would have walked right over to him and sat down next to him, today she paused a moment. She was always more conscious of those around her after a battle; any one of them could have died. Kelly didn't know what she would do without John. He was her leader, but he was so much more. Sam had taken so much of Kelly when he died that if John died too, Kelly feared there would be nothing left of her. The three of them had been so close for so longâ€¦

The Spartan watched her leader and friend, just admiring him. She loved the way he looked, loved the way he movedâ€¦ She knew by the way he sat that he was deep in thought. She had John memorized. After so many years, it would have been hard not to.

John sighed and Kelly was broken from her trance. "Kelly," he whispered.

A smile broke across Kelly's face and she moved towards him again. "I didn't know you knew I was here," she commented, smiling as she slid into the chair next to John.

He flinched and turned towards her in surprise. "I didn't," he admitted.

Kelly frowned in confusion. "But you said my name."

Something changed behind John's eyes, and Kelly instinctively knew what was coming. "I'm sorry, I guess I did. Wrong Kelly though," he laughed slightly.

To the female Spartan, though, it wasn't a laughing matter. She tried to pass it off as such, but her insides were suddenly filled with lead. She was the wrong Kelly? She'd been the Kelly with him for almost forever! How was she the wrong Kelly?

She continued talking with John, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Somehow, she would change that. It should be her John was thinking of, not the green lieutenant. Apology entirely forgotten, Kelly started scheming. The other Kelly was the wrong Kelly, and somehow, soon, Kelly would figure out a way to change John's backwards thinking.

11. Green Zone

Chapter 11:

Green Zone:

Lisa Blackwood was a lieutenant commander. She'd worked hard every day of her life to get there too, following in her mother's footsteps. She'd worked hard in school to get good grades. She'd pushed herself hard to become stronger, faster, and better than anyone expected from her physically. It had paid off. She was an attachÃ© of the Spartan troops on board and on-location assistant to

one of the most brilliant-albeit civilian-scientists of her time. Even when Dr. Halsey wasn't on board-she'd departed for another ship bound for Reach where she had more important work-Lisa was the one in charge of testing the Spartans for the doctor and reporting on their actions. As such, Lisa was no stranger to hard work. She gave 110% every day. So when Kelly had asked for help improving her marksmanship, of course Lisa had agreed. She'd heard so many others refer to Kelly as green, and Lisa wanted to help her. "So why now?" she asked once they were in the ship's shooting range.

Kelly shrugged vaguely. "Just figured it would be good?" she suggested vaguely.

Lisa, who had been checking over her pistol, set it back down and fixed Kelly with a stare. "Come on. You'll tell me the truth sooner or later, so you might as well just get it over with."

Kelly aimed her pistol at the target and fired once. She missed. Sighing, she set the gun down. "The Master Chief told me to," she mumbled.

"Oh yeah?" Lisa asked.

Kelly put her hands on her hips and glared at the other woman. "I missed more than half my shots at a grunt running at me with grenades, and after I missed an elite point-blank, he yelled at me to learn how to shoot."

"He yelled?" Lisa clarified, surprised. She'd never heard any of the Spartans yell at someone before.

"Well, not really yelled..." Kelly grimaced. "It was more of an angry-sounding order."

"Ah."

"And I don't even know why, either!" the lieutenant exclaimed, giving up on keeping her feelings to herself and just ranting. "I thought we were getting along. I mean, he's been helping me out in the gym, and I thought we were gaining, you know, mutual respect for each other or whatever. But I kill a single elite bastardâ€"because I did kill it, Lisaâ€"he gets all in my face about missing it once! And then, just when I think he's all mad at me, he fucking saves my life! The Spartans are running out of the damn ship like hell's on their heels, and of course I can't keep up with them, and being a failure, I trip and fall and he comes back and fucking **carries** me to the Pelican! What's up with that? Seriously!" Finished, Kelly let out a huff of exasperation.

The other woman raised her eyebrows. "He's been helping you in the gym?"

"Yeah, we've been working out."

"Huh," Lisa murmured, thinking. "Come on. I guess we should teach you to shoot then."

"But what's up with him?" Kelly's confusion burst out. "He's all hot and cold. I don't understand what he's thinking!"

Lisa shrugged. "Honestly, Kelly? I have no idea. There's a reason most people think the Spartans are just machines. They don't really show emotions very often, and when they do, it's hard to understand. They're so different about it, like they don't really understand them. So I can't really tell you." She picked her pistol back up and flicked the safety off. "You want to get started?" she asked calmly.

Kelly nodded, slipping her noise-canceling headset on. "Yeah. Let's do this."

Lisa grinned and did the same. "Okay," she said over the walkie-talkie. "Let's see you shoot some."

Kelly lifted her pistol, carefully aimed, and fired. She paused, corrected for the pistol's kick, and fired again. Lisa watched as her friend fired five times then set down the gun. "How was that?" she asked.

Lisa pressed a button and the target moved closer so the women could inspect it. Of the five shots, three had hit. One was even relatively close to the head. "Well, not too bad," Lisa said, trying to be positive. She sent the target back to where it needed to be. "Let's, um, work on your stance. Stand how you would to shoot." Kelly adjusted her stance and Lisa copied it. "Okay. You need to move your left leg forward a bit... Um, make sure your elbows aren't locked..." Kelly obeyed, but something still looked wrong. Lisa assessed her, trying to figure out what it was, but her thoughts were interrupted.

"You don't know the gun." The two women turned in surprise to see the Master Chief entering the room.

The women removed their headsets. "Excuse me?" Lisa asked.

"You don't know the gun," the Spartan repeated. Even without his armor, he looked imposing. "You need to know your gun. Understand how it works, exactly how much kick it's going to give you. It's not just a weapon you pick up and discard as you need to, it's a tool of your trade. You need to know exactly how much it weighs in your hand, exactly how you need to grip it. Hold it when you don't need your hand, just to get used to it being there. You need to get to where you know your weapon so well that you can see your enemy once and know exactly where you need to aim to hit it. May I?" he asked Kelly.

She handed the gun to him, and the Spartan fired two shots at the target. "Practice. It just takes lots of practice." He handed the gun back. "I'm sorry to interrupt. I didn't know anyone else would be in here. I'll leave you two to work now." He saluted before leaving. The women returned his salute, and as soon as the door had shut behind him, Kelly turned to Lisa.

"What the hell was that?"

Lisa hit the button to move the target closer again. "I have no idea," she admitted. "But look at that."

The target had two more holes in it than it had when Kelly had shot at it: one in the center of the forehead and one in the chest, right

where the heart would be. "Holy crap," Kelly murmured.

Lisa nodded. "Even I'm not that good, and I'm pretty good, not meaning to brag."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Kelly agreed. "You are. He barely even saw the target, didn't he? He was watching us the whole time."

"He was watching *you* the whole time," Lisa corrected. Kelly looked totally baffled, and Lisa laughed. "I guess he's glad you're getting help?" Kelly sighed and Lisa nudged her. "Come on. He said practice, so let's get some practice in." They slipped their headsets back on and Kelly started firing. Lisa watched, still in awe of the Master Chief's shots. If that's what he was expecting of Kelly, he would be disappointed. Lisa wasn't that good, and there was no way in hell Kelly was. Maybe though, with enough practice, she could at least be better. Kelly stopped firing and Lisa sighted at the target, keeping herself from sighing. She definitely had her work cut out for her.

12. Green Tequila

Chapter 12:

Green Tequila:

John sat alone and in silence in the room on the Commonwealth he'd come to claim as his own. He'd started coming here after Sam's death just to be away from his team and alone with his thoughts. Where before he'd been mourning the death of his friend, however, now he was mourning the death of millions. He couldn't believe the firepower the Covenant had, that it could turn an entire planet to glass in a matter of hours. Billions dead, with no chance to escape from the plasma raining from space. For the first time, John wondered if the UNSC had even a chance to win this war. From where he sat, it looked like they were all going to go the same way as Vallera 3.

There was more to his mood than that, however much he didn't want to admit it. Lieutenant Kelly Martin. The way he had reacted when she'd been in danger had surprised him. She had looked upset after he'd told her to learn how to shootâ€| but he had been genuinely afraid for the woman. He didn't want her to get hurt, and he couldn't understand why he had reacted so strongly that way. And the feeling he'd gotten, seeing Isaac practically holding Kelly's handâ€|

There was a sharp knock at the door, and John pointed his pistol in that direction, though his heart wasn't in it. The door slid open and his second in command, Kelly-087, entered, carrying two glass bottles filled with a dull green liquid. She spared a glance at the pistol. "I take it either the Covenant has boarded the ship since I last heard, or you want to be left alone."

"The second one," John muttered, morosely thumbing the safety on the gun and sticking it back into its holster.

Kelly ignored his words, instead coming over to sit next to him. She handed him one of the bottles. "Too bad," she told him. "You need to snap out of this depression. Your team is relying on you, and they

haven't even seen you since we disembarked the Pelican."

"And you're here why?" John asked.

"I'm here to help," Kelly said earnestly. She uncapped her bottle and did the same with his. "Drink up," she ordered.

John took a swig at the same time she did and almost spit it out. He hadn't been expecting the burning sensation that followed the liquid down his throat. "What is this?" he rasped, coughing.

Kelly shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure, actually. Alcohol of some sort, I know. Beyond that, not a clue."

"Kellyâ€¦" John warned.

The woman held up her hands, one still holding her bottle. "John, come on. Don't try to tell me that you shouldn't be drinking because you're on duty. We're all pretty much off whenever the ship transitions into SlipSpace, you know that. And as for getting drunk, well, unless you drink the whole bottle, you shouldn't have a problem with that. I mean, come on. We're Spartans. And you need something to cheer you up." John hesitated, but Kelly nudged him. "Come on," she prompted. The man sighed and took another drink. Kelly broke into a grin. "There you go," she said cheerfully.

John shook his head. "Fine. Continue cheering me up. Talk to me."

"Okay," she agreed. "What do you want me to tell you about?"

"How about the worst mistake you've made in your MJOLNIR so far," he suggested. "But only if it's funny, not morbid."

Kelly readily complied, and as John listened and laughed, he found himself taking more and more sips of the burning liquid and laughing more and more often. Before he knew it, Kelly's bottle was empty and they were both laughing almost uncontrollably. "So then I said to the guy, 'Come on, I'm a Spartan, not god'," Kelly giggle, and she and John both broke out in laughter again.

"Cheers," John said, knocking his bottle against hers and downing the last few drops.

"Whoops," Kelly exclaimed. "All out." She tried to stand, planning to go get some more, but found that she couldn't stand very well and instead collapsed. John caught her and kept holding on to her, laughing at her clumsiness. "I think I'd rather stay here now," she said suggestively, putting a hand behind John's head.

Before he knew what was going on, their lips met in a sloppy kiss. John's initial reaction was to want to pull away, but in less-than-focused the state he was, instead he kissed Kelly back. Their lips moved against each other's for a minute before Kelly pushed John to the floor. He barely stopped his head from hitting, but took it as an opportunity to use more force in return as she straddled him. Kelly literally tore his shirt off, and he ripped hers trying to get it off of her. John's hands recklessly went to her chest, and she moaned in pleasure. Kelly's hands reached for the waistband of John's pants, and the door slid open.

Dr. Halsey's assistant, Lisa, stood there. The numb expression on her face was quickly replaced as her eyes widened in surprise. Instantly sober, John scrambled out from under Kelly, who just giggled softly. Lisa started to say something and stopped before she sighed and shook her head. "Whatever. Halsey emailed, she wants a report from you at some point, Chief." She stepped back and the door slid shut.

John glared at Kelly. "What the hell did you _give_ me?" he exclaimed. "We shouldn't have done that. We shouldn't have done _that_," he gestured to their torn shirts, "either." He shook his head, trying to clear himself of the last traces of alcohol. "I'm going to go. Stay here until you're sober enough to walk," he ordered.

Kelly's laughter stopped abruptly as John carefully stood and walked towards the door. "No, John, wait! Don't go," she pleaded drunkenly.

"Kelly-," he warned.

"No, stay here!" she slurred. "I like you, John, I really like you."

"Kelly, don't do this," he tried.

"No, you don't get it!" she exclaimed. "I really, really, _really_ like you!"

John's stare was cold enough to make Kelly freeze and cut off whatever else she had been going to say. "No, Kelly, you don't," he said coldly. "You're just drunk. I'm leaving." Ignoring any more protest from Kelly, he strode from the room, hoping to get back to the barracks before anyone spotted him without a shirt and before he collapsed.

In spite of headaches the next morning, John and Kelly were both up and functioning almost as well as the rest of the Spartans. Kelly cornered John as he was leaving the ship's gym. "Last night never happened," she hissed, eyes furious. She soundedâ€¦ mean. Meaner than John had ever heard her. Though rather her anger was directed at him or herself, he didn't know.

Instead of asking, he just nodded in wholehearted agreement. "It never happened." It had all been just a mistake, and hopefully they could put it behind them.

13. Barely Green

Chapter 13:

Barely Green:

Lieutenant Kelly Martin lay her head down on the table. It was too early to be awake, especially after the day before. The Commonwealth had watched as the Covenant glassed the planet Vallera 3. Kelly had stood on the bridge watching as millions burned on the planet below. The Spartans had been fighting on the ground, but they'd been called back to the ship when it was obvious there was no way the battle

could be won. The planet was doomed, and if they had stayed any longer, they would have been too. Kelly had been helping, getting experience coordinating ground operations, when the decision was made by the UNSC forces that Vallera 3 needed to be abandoned. She had stood on the bridge and watched the planet's death as long as they could before they had to escape to safety. The Master Chief had been there too. While over half the bridge crew had shown some sign of falling apartâ€”Kelly couldn't stop herself from shakingâ€”the Spartan had merely stood silently. He hadn't spoken. He had barely moved, only glancing over the bridge crew once. Kelly thought he had seen her, but if he had, he ignored her. Kelly had gone to Lisa's room and just sat there with her and Maggie for the night. They had all fallen asleep at some point, but they had needed to be together. They needed to be reassured that someone was still there, and that the Covenant hadn't killed everyone. Kelly was stiff from sleeping on a metal floor, and her face was puffy from crying. Maggie rubbed at her neck, eyes bloodshot. Lisa looked numb. Of the three of them, she was the only one that hadn't cried. She seemed hollow instead. They were all up and at breakfast though. Maggie picked at her food. Lisa ate, but the motion was mechanical. Kelly closed her eyes and tried to forget about the day before. She felt barely present, insignificant after all that had happened yesterday. She felt beaten.

It didn't seem possible. How could one enemy have the firepower to turn an entire planet into glass? Millions had been killed. They couldn't have fled. There was no escape from the plasma raining from space. People had been killed. Families. Friends. Parents, unable to protect their children from the hell that would come right before death. So many lives lost... It was almost impossible to take in. The sense of loss was overwhelming.

The door to the mess hall clicked as it slid shut. While it normally couldn't be heard, today the large room was quiet, voices conversing softly. Kelly halfheartedly opened her eyes to see who had come in. Together as usual, the Spartans walked over to their customary table. With nothing else to look at, Kelly stared emotionlessly as they got food and sat to eat. None of them looked like they were hollow, or like they'd cried. No, that wasn't quite true. As Kelly stared, she noticed a few of the Spartans looked different. Sheila's eyes were a little red. Grace's were too. Isaac's motions were too deliberate. He seemed to think about each action before he moved. The longer Kelly watched, the more she realized things were just barely off about each of the Spartans. Most people probably wouldn't be able to see anything. Kelly realized she'd gotten to know the Spartans a lot better than she thought. Her eyes moved to the Master Chief, trying to figure out how the planet's glassing had affected him. Kelly frowned slightly, confused. He looked normal, or if anything, a little moody. The Spartan next to himâ€”Kelly wasn't sure who he was or why Kelly-087 wasn't there as normalâ€”said something and the Master Chief's eyes narrowed. He looked... not angry, that was too strong an emotion. Pissy? He sighed and rubbed his head, glancing over to meet Kelly's eyes. Not caring enough to move, Kelly just stared back. Eventually, the Master Chief sighed and looked away, still upset.

"He can't be human," Kelly said matter-of-factly to the women at the table with her.

"He's not," Lisa responded, knowing who Kelly was talking about.

"He's a goddamn Spartan."

"No, like, he doesn't feel," Kelly clarified, sounding half-asleep. "He saw the whole thing yesterday from the bridge and barely moved. And now look at him. He looks like someone annoyed him. Nothing more. He can't be human at all. A human would have reacted."

"He did," Lisa corrected numbly. "He and his second got drunk and got caught in the act."

Maggie laughed bitterly. Kelly froze, suddenly awake. "What?" she asked in disbelief. "Who's his second?"

"Kelly."

The human Kelly felt a rise of emotion in her. Jealousy, anger, hurt, sorrow... _Why the hell..._ "Classy," Maggie snorted.

"How do you know?" Kelly asked quickly, taking her head off the table and looking at Lisa.

"Because I was the one that caught them."

"Even better," Maggie said sarcastically.

"You caught them having sex?" Kelly hissed, trying to make sure they weren't overheard.

Lisa almost smiled. "Someone's awake all of a sudden. And no, they weren't actually having sex, they were just making out, sans shirts. No big deal."

"I don't blame them," Maggie sighed. "I think we could all use a little fun and distraction now."

Lisa laughed tonelessly. "Yeah, I guess so. But in response to your statement, Kelly, yeah, he is human. At least some."

"Thanks," Kelly murmured, not wanting to believe what she was feeling. She was no stranger to jealousy, though. It wasn't as if she had never fallen in love, either. Whether she liked it or not, the truth had to be faced: at some point in time, Kelly had started to fall for a super soldier who seemed to be annoyed by her very existence. Who was hot and cold with her. Who saved her life but then made her feel worthless. And to top it all off, she didn't even know his fucking first name.

14. My Green Eyed Girl

Chapter 14:

My Green-Eyed Girl

For the second time, Spartan John-117 stood outside of Lieutenant Kelly Martin's bunk, and for the second time, he had to convince himself to knock. Unlike the previous time, however, this time he wasn't there because he was ordered to be so. He felt nervous. That was the word for what he was feeling, or at least, he thought that was it. John had a strange reluctance to knock, but at the same

time, he wanted to talk to Kelly. It didn't make sense.

A crew member walked past, nodding a greeting to John. The Spartan nodded back awkwardly, then quickly knocked before he could stop himself. "Who is it?" Kelly's voice called from inside.

"Spartan 117," John replied. There was a pause and the door slid open. Kelly leaned against the frame, arms crossed casually. She was dressed casually too, not wearing her uniform. John's instinct was to tell her that she was disobeying the rules, but he stopped himself. It didn't really matter considering they were safe in Slipstream Space, and judging by her body language, she was comfortable and content. He couldn't read her expression though, no matter how hard he tried. "Do you have time to talk?" he asked.

Kelly nodded. "Yeah, sure, come in," she said, stepping back into the room. John followed her, glancing around. It seemed like a completely different room than the last time he had been in here, but that was probably because there was more light now. Kelly's computer screen wasn't the only light, although it was lit, displaying an open email.

"I'm sorry, did I interrupt you?" John apologized.

Kelly shook her head. "No, you're fine. I was just writing home."

"Where is home?" the Spartan asked, curious. "Or is that too personal?"

"Again, you're fine," Kelly said before smiling wistfully, thoughts clearly elsewhere. "Home is on Reach. My parents still live there. I like to write to them sometimes and let them know what's going on. Even before I was sent here, I was stationed across the planet from them."

"You must be very close," John inferred.

"They're my only family," Kelly explained, shrugging before she changed the subject. "You wanted to talk to me?"

John nodded, hands clenched awkwardly behind his back. Why was this so hard? "I wanted to apologize and try to explain my actions," he stated. Kelly raised her eyebrows and John explained. "I heard what you said in the shooting range the other day."

"Oh," Kelly murmured, looking sheepish. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you could hear us."

"My hearing ability was enhanced by the surgeries I went through," John explained lamely. "All of the Spartans' were. So yeah, I could hear you."

"I'm sorryâ€|" Kelly repeated, looking unsure of what else to say.

John got himself back on track. He wasn't here to make her feel bad; he wanted to make her feel better. "No, don't worry about it. You didn't know. I wanted to explain my actions though. I apologize for seemingâ€| hot and cold. I don't mean to be. I'm glad I can help you

in the gym, and I'm glad I could assist you on the Covenant ship."

Kelly laughed. "'Assist' me? You saved my life. If I could ever repay youâ€¦ But you probably wouldn't ever need my help, considering you're a Spartan." John started to interrupt, but she cut him off. "I know it's not enough, but thank you."

The Spartan shrugged awkwardly. "That's what I do." There was silence for a moment before he continued. "I'm sorry for yelling, though. To learn how to shoot. I didn't mean to. I was justâ€¦ I was scared," he admitted, staring at the wall behind Kelly. "I was afraid because you could have been killed, and I can't save you from that. Next time an Elite charges you, it may not be hurt already. You can't afford to miss. I'm glad Lisa was helping you," he added after another pause. His comment was again met with silence, and he looked up to see Kelly staring at him. Her eyes were a light, clear green, and John found himself unable to keep from staring. He blinked and forced himself to focus. He'd never noticed her eyes before, or anyone else's for that matter. Now was not the time.

"You were scared?" Kelly asked softly.

There was a strange look on her face and John hesitated. Was she upset? He hadn't meant to upset her again. But he'd already said it once, he couldn't deny it now. "Yeah," he repeated quietly. "I don't mean to make you feel like I don't think you can take care of yourself, I mean, you did take down the Elite, it's just, I don't know, I was just afraid. And that's strange for me, I don't get scared, I just-." Kelly smirked and John stopped rambling, embarrassed but refusing to show it. "Anyway, I just wanted to explain. I'll be going now."

He took a step towards the door, but Kelly finally spoke. "Wait. Um, Chief," she tried. John paused, automatically answering to his rank. "I wasn't laughing at you, I justâ€¦ Spartans are never scared, you know? And that's what you said. Out of curiosity thoughâ€¦" she continued slowly, "do you know why you were scared for me?"

John turned and met those soft, green eyes again. "I don't know," he admitted honestly.

For a second, he thought he saw disappointment flash across her face. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared though, and the ONI agent poker face was back. "Just wondering," she said passively before letting her emotions show again. "And it's all good. Thanks for explaining. I'm sorry I was saying that stuff to Lisa."

"Don't worry," John replied. "I understand."

"Thanks," Kelly smiled. There was another pause, then she blurted out, "You and Kelly. Are you, I meanâ€¦ fuck, I'm sorry, I'm being nosy, I shouldn't have said anything, I'm sorry, I-."

"No," John interrupted firmly. Kelly stopped abruptly, his tone of voice surprising her. "Kelly-087 and I are no more than friends who made a bad choice regarding alcohol." He grimaced. "How did you hearâ€¦ Lisa," he realized at the same time Kelly said it. "Please don't spread that," the Spartan asked. "I don't want anyone getting the wrong idea."

Kelly nodded slowly, clearly thinking. "No, I won't tell anyone, and I'll tell Lisa and Maggie to do the same."

John started to ask who Maggie was, but decided against it. "Can I ask why you wanted to know?" he questioned instead.

Kelly shrugged, and John almost believed it was natural. "I don't know," she repeated the answer the Spartan had given her earlier.

He didn't believe her, but let it drop. "I should be going," he said.

"Yeah, I have stuff to do too," Kelly agreed, gesturing lamely at the room in general. "Thanks for, well, everything, Chief," she said softly before grimacing. "May I ask?" Kelly continued, sounding hesitant. "What's your first name?"

John smiled. For some reason, he liked that she wanted to know him better. "John," he replied without hesitating.

"John," Kelly repeated, smiling as she tried out the name. She nodded. "I like it. It suits you."

"Good. I was afraid if you didn't, I would have to change it."

Kelly's mouth opened in surprise, and she was unable to stop her laughter from coming out. John couldn't help smiling, warmth spreading through him at the sound. He was glad he had been able to make her laugh, and he knew he would have to try to do so again. "That was good," Kelly giggled appreciatively. "I didn't know you had a funny side."

John shrugged, still smiling. "Well, we Spartans certainly aren't the machines people make us out to be."

Kelly just looked at him, head cocked slightly and expression a little strange all of a sudden. "No, you're really not," she said seriously. "Thank you, John. For everything," the woman continued softly. "Do you mind if I call you John?"

The Spartan shook his head. "I'd like that," he admitted truthfully. Kelly smiled, and for a time, they just stared at each other, lost in thoughts. Then, suddenly, the moment was broken. "I should go," John repeated, and Kelly nodded.

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll see you around, thoughâ€¦ John."

The Spartan smiled as he saluted and left. John. It felt good to hear her say his name. He couldn't seem to stop smiling either. Even after all that had happened and all that lay ahead of him, the thought of Kelly kept him in a good mood. It wasn't until Kelly-087 told him that he looked like a mindless idiot that he forced himself to stop and focus on something else. It was harder than it looked though.

A/N: The title is in reference to the song Brown Eyed Girl by Van Morrison. I do not own the song or any rights or whatever. Also, as I forgot to put this earlier, I don't own Halo or anything like that.

Just so we're all aware. And thanks for all the comments, guys
:)

15. Shiny Green Armor

Chapter 15:

Shiny Green

"He likes you."

Kelly glanced up, Lisa's matter-of-fact voice disrupting her covert gazing at John. "Who does?" she asked, not allowing herself to entertain the idea that Lisa knew something Kelly didn't.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "You know very well who I'm talking about," she scoffed. "Spartan-117. The Master Chief. He likes you."

Kelly hated the stupid little feeling of hope she got. "No," she laughed. "You're crazy."

Lisa shook her head. "No. Listen to me. I'm serious. He likes you, and that's not necessarily a good thing."

Surprised at Lisa's tone of voice, Kelly forced herself to focus. "Wait, what?" Kelly asked impulsively before lowering her voice and continuing carefully. "Why do you say that? And why do you think I even care to hear this?"

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "Really, Kelly, I'm not blind. I know you like him, at least to some extent. I won't ask for more details because frankly, I don't need to know. And that's fine for you, you know what you're doing. The Chief, thoughâ€¦ Kelly, for the most part, the Spartans don't interact with humans, not in the friends/more than friends sense anyway. Their people skills suck. He doesn't know enough to be able to hide how he feels, at least, not very well. I can tell he likes you, don't deny it, you see it too. But I'm warning you, he might not know that. You said he didn't know why he was scared for you. Kelly, maybe he really doesn't. Just because he likes you doesn't mean he understands the consequences of that emotionally, or what it means to you. And even if he does and he's okay with that, if it's against his rulesâ€¦" Lisa leaned back in her seat. "That's all I wanted to say. Just thought I'd let you know."

Kelly nodded, deep in thoughts of John again. "Yeah, I see what you mean," she murmured. "I guess we'll just see how things play out. We can't really do much else." The women sat in contemplative silence before Kelly leaned forward again, grinning. "You really think he likes me?"

Lisa laughed. "Yes, Kelly, I really think he likes you. He acts differently around you than any other human I've ever seen, and the other Spartans too. It's obvious."

Kelly couldn't help grinning in delight. "Who likes who? What's so obvious?" Maggie interrupted, walking up to the table where the women sat. Kelly froze, not wanting to tell the rather-gossipy woman.

Lisa must have felt the same way, for she smoothly covered. "Captain Keyes and Dr. Halsey. I mean, could they be any more obvious?"

Maggie sighed dramatically as she sat. "No," she agreed. "Seriously. Everyone knows Miranda had to come from somewhere. It's the UNSC's worst-kept secret."

Kelly nodded without really paying attention, meeting Lisa's eyes in an attempt to convey her thanks. Instead, though, the other woman's expression held another warning, one that Kelly didn't have too much trouble figuring out: No matter how things turned out, if she and John weren't careful, they could become the UNSC's new infamous couple. Kelly nodded slightly, showing Lisa that she understood. At that moment, someone cleared his throat, and all three women turned to see John standing by their table. "You said you wanted to see me?" he said, looking only at Kelly.

She smiled up at him before standing. "Yes. I need your help with something. If you'll excuse me," she told Lisa and Maggie before walking away with John.

It was strange walking with a Spartan. Even though Kelly was about average height, John was still much taller than her. He made her feel tiny, and delicate. It was kind of a nice feeling. Kelly risked a sidelong glance at his muscular arms, wondering for a moment how it would feel to be wrapped in them in an embrace. John's voice cut into her thoughts. "What do you need my help with?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, nothing major," Kelly replied airily. "I've been told to conduct an experiment about the possibility of bringing a Spartan back from the dead, and I thought you would make a good test subject-." John abruptly stopped walking, Kelly turned to see an expression of horror on his face. "I'm kidding, 100% kidding," she laughed. "See? You're not the only one that can make jokes."

He nodded and unfroze, but some of the horror remained in his eyes. "I guess not," the Spartan agreed. "It's justâ€¦ I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you feel bad. I've just seen too much. If there was any way that they could bring a Spartan backâ€¦"

Oh. Kelly rethought what she'd said and felt horrible. "Oh, god, John, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-."

"Don't worry," he dismissed her apology. "It was a good joke." John attempted to smile, and Kelly hesitantly returned it. "Seriously, though, what do you need me for?"

It was the lieutenant's turn to suddenly halt. "What am I doing?" she asked rhetorically. "You lead the way. Take me to wherever your armor is, please. I want to try some modifications," she explained as John led her down a different passageway. "Modifying the shield, specifically. I managed to find the blueprints for your MJOLNIR in ONI's files. Do you know how much just one suit of armor costs, by the way?" John shook his head and Kelly shuddered. "Good. You don't want to know. I'm not even going to tell you. Trust me. You don't want to know, or you'd be protecting it instead of it protecting you. Anyway," she continued, "I've been playing around with components, and I think I found a way that could double the strength of your

shield for a matter of seconds. If it's alright with you, I can apply it to your armor, and then if it works, I can give it to the rest of your Spartans."

John sounded less than enthusiastic. "You want to modify my shields? And you're not entirely sure it will work?"

Kelly responded seriously. "No, I can't tell you I'm entirely sure. I'm not going to lie to you. There's a chance it could not work, and there's a chance that it could take down different electronic components of your armor. I think it's worth the risk, however. We can test it on the ship, and if it doesn't work, I can try to fix whatever damage it does. â€|It might work a little differently in battle though, with the shield actually being used," Kelly admitted. "Like I said, I'm not entirely sure."

The Spartan hesitated again, but sounded more confident when he spoke again. "Okay. You can try it."

Kelly beamed, and John halted outside of a seemingly random door. He keyed in a code that the lieutenant probably could have bypassed before leading her into the room. The lighting reminded Kelly of a museum. There were glass cases covering all of the walls, each containing a full suit of MJOLNIR. Lights shone on them, emphasizing each scratch and dent in the armor. They reflected a shiny olive green color which seemed to fill the room. John placed his hand against a pad on the far wall, and one of the cases opened. He nodded at it, looking at Kelly. "There you go. Which pieces do you need?"

The lieutenant scrutinized the armor for a moment before responding. "Helmet and chest piece, please."

John picked up the parts in question and offered them to Kelly. She sat down on the floor, taking the pieces in her lap. Kelly tried to work quickly, focusing on what she was doing, but it was hard with John so near to her. Almost ten minutes later, she finally looked up to realize that he had been staring at her. "Done," she said needlessly, handing him the helmet without breaking her gaze away from his eyes.

John stood and moved towards the case containing the rest of his armor. He then looked expectantly at Kelly. She hesitated. "Is there something I missed?" she asked nervously.

The Spartan shook his head. "I just need to put on the whole suit to make sure it all checks out. I might need your help, but there are some parts I need to get by myself." Kelly nodded, still not understanding. John elaborated awkwardly. "We, uh, don't wear anything under our armor. It doesn't work that way."

Kelly's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh," was all she could manage at first. "I'll wait outside." John nodded, and the lieutenant stepped outside of the room. It wasn't long before he called her back into the room. Kelly froze just inside the door, surprised. She'd never seen the Spartan with only half of his armor on before, and the other half of him was covered in nothing but scars. He held his chest piece, offering it to her, but Kelly was distracted by the tapestry of marks across his back. She traced one of the longest ones lightly, and saw goosebumps race across the Spartan's skin. "How did you get

this one?" she asked softly.

"Insurrectionist blade," John replied neutrally. "We were trying to evacuate a group of civilians that they were holding hostage, and it turned into a close-quarters battle. We barely got out of there, but we managed to rescue most of the hostages."

Kelly shook her head slowly, moving around to face John so she could take the piece of armor. "You're incredible," she murmured seriously, meeting his eyes and feeling a thrill of fear dart through her. What would he think of what she'd said? Would he understand how much she meant it, or would he think she was just saying things?

John returned her gaze steadily. "No," he replied softly, "I'm just a man trying to make the universe a better place."

Kelly smiled. "And you're an incredible man, John. I mean it."

"Thank you," he said truthfully. "That means a lot to me."

Loud laughter came from outside the room as a group of people passed by, and the moment the two had shared was shattered. Kelly carefully followed John's instructions for putting on his armor. Encased in the protective covering, he didn't look human. Kelly felt the same sense of awe that she had felt the first time she saw the Spartans, but this time there was more to it, deeper emotions that she couldn't perfectly name. She forced herself to focus rather than worry over her feelings. "Well?" she asked. "Try it out."

The Spartan didn't seem to move, but Kelly figured his prolonged silence meant he must have initiated the procedure she had added. She waited patiently for him to speak. "It seems to work," he said finally, voice sounding lower and raspier than usual over his armor's com. "There's a green bar that appears over my shield indicator and slowly drains. That's what it's supposed to do?"

Kelly nodded, grinning proudly. "Yes. That's just the visual aid, but it should work perfectly fine in the field."

John removed the helmet and nodded appreciatively at the woman. "Kelly, if this worksâ€¦ I think we'll all end up owing you our lives," he said seriously.

"I'm just trying to repay my debt," she said softly. There was silence again before Kelly looked away, fidgeting with the ring she always wore. "Well, I need to go," she stated before succumbing to the need to give John a few more instructions. "Try not to use it for the first time when you need it, because if it doesn't work, you'll be in even more trouble. If you want to test it out on the ship with one of the other Spartans, that could work too, but it might respond differently to plasma than bullets. And make sure you tell me everything, any little seemingly insignificant details about it, okay?"

The Spartan nodded, looking like he was concealing a smile. "Yes ma'am."

Kelly laughed. "Good. I'll see you later then?" she asked, suddenly sounding unsure of herself.

"Definitely."

Kelly left feeling accomplished. Yes, her feelings for John were confusing, and yes, everything Lisa had warned her about was probably true. But she had given him a gift, and if it helped him even the slightest bit, then that was something of which she could be proud.

16. Green Flash

Chapter 16:

Green Flash

John floated somewhere at the edge of life. The world was vague, covered in this ever-changing fog that obscured everything that seemed to be reality. His brain reeled, his eyes couldn't keep up with what was going on around him. Green figures blurred around him, yelling, occasionally leaning close to him. Then the fog covered them too.

The Spartan closed his eyes, and when he opened them, there was nothing but grey. He was going to die. He knew that. It wasn't the first time he had shaken hands with death, but this time, he did not want to go. Kelly. Her name echoed in his head, and for a moment, John struggled to see through the fog. For some reason, he knew now wasn't his time. He couldn't leave now. He'd just found her; he wanted to stay with her. He'd never had the chance to tell her how much she meant to him. Kelly. He wanted to tell her... tell her what? He didn't know how to explain what he felt, or how to put it into words. It was a feeling, not a word. He wanted to be with her. He wanted to make her laugh, to make her feel better when she was upset. He wanted her to be safe, and he wanted to be the one protecting her. He wanted to hold her in his arms. He wanted her to feel special. He... cared about her. Kelly. He wished he had kissed her. It didn't matter when; he should have found a time. When she had helped him with his armor. That would have been a perfect time. But he hadn't. He'd wanted to, but he hadn't. He had kissed a Kelly, but the wrong Kelly. He wanted to make everything right... But now he wouldn't get a chance.

John kept fighting, straining to clear his vision. He had to make it back to Kelly. He knew that now. He wished he had realized it before. He wasn't stupid, though. He'd been told his whole life that wishes didn't mean anything. He couldn't just wish to survive this, he had to make it happen. If he survived this, he swore to himself that he would talk to Kelly. Rules or no rules, he had to at least tell her. Even if she didn't feel the same way, at least she would know what he felt.

Kelly. She had saved his life. When John tried to concentrate, he got flashes of what had happened to him. A Hunter's roar, the green flash of its fuel rod cannon as it fired, John being thrown backward, his head slamming against his helmet and the ground. Without the overshield that Kelly had given him, he would have been killed. As it was, he wasn't entirely sure he wasn't dead. He couldn't feel the pain anymore. John thought that was a bad sign. While he'd come close before, though, he'd never actually died, so he

couldn't be certain.

"Hang in there, man."

John tried to look around, surprised. He knew that voice. Sam. John tried to say something, tried to apologize to Sam for not being able to save him, but found that he couldn't. All he could do was hang in the balance and keep fighting. He instinctively knew that if he succumbed to the fog surrounding him, he wouldn't wake up.

_Would that be so bad? _John wondered seriously. If he died, he would be with Sam and all the other Spartans that had died during the operations. He wouldn't have to witness the deaths of the rest of his Spartans, because surely, against the Covenant, they were all going to die. He wouldn't have to watch, helpless, as the Covenant glassed more worlds. _To just give in would be so easy..._

"Finish the fight."

This time, the voice sounded like Kelly's. John forced himself to shut out the part of him that said to just give in, and kept struggling. He had to make it back, if only so that he could tell Kelly how he felt. He had to make it through this. He had to get back to her.

17. Green Armor, Red Blood

Chapter 17:

Battered Green

Kelly watched, heart in her throat, as the Pelican landed in the hangar. Almost immediately, the ramp was down and the Spartans were on the ground, running. Two of them carried a stretcher between them, on which one Spartan lay. John. A medical team ran to meet them, pulling out datapads and all kinds of equipment as they did so. They rushed the unconscious Spartan off towards the med bay. Kelly quickly ran to follow them. By the time she caught up, the doors were closed and John was in emergency surgery. A few of the Spartans loitered outside; the rest had dispersed.

One of the Spartans pulled off its helmet to reveal Kelly-087. "What the fuck did you do?" she yelled, seeing the lieutenant.

Kelly froze, her insides turning to ice. "Oh my god. Did it not work? What happened?" she demanded.

"Tell me what you did first!" Kelly-087 exclaimed.

"I can't until you tell me what happened!"

Will pulled off his helmet. "Both of you, stop. You're not helping anything by yelling at each other. I don't mean any disrespect, Lieutenant, but seriously. You two need to stop." Fred pulled off his helmet and Will turned to him. "Fred, would you explain, considering Kelly clearly can't?"

Kelly-087 openly glared at him, but Will ignored her. "There were Hunters," Fred explained. "We were supposed to clear the area, and we

did, but the Hunters took a little longer to dispatch. One of them managed to hit the Chief. Kelly here," he gestured at the angry woman, "figures you did something, considering that the shot didn't destroy him. She should be thanking you, considering that whatever you did probably saved his life."

"Or it just hurt him more!" Kelly-087 spat.

The remaining Spartan sighed, not removing her helmet and not looking up from where she sat on the ground. "Kelly, shut up. You're just scared because he could have died. Don't take it out on other-Kelly. If whatever she did hurt the Chief more, he would have died. So shut up. Some of us are in pain, and some of us are not in the mood to put up with your bitching."

Fred smirked. "So what did you do?" Will asked.

Kelly felt a wave of relief so intense, her legs felt like they wouldn't support her. What she'd done hadn't hurt John, it had saved his life. "I call it an overshield," she explained, sinking down to sit on the floor. "It's supposed to effectively double the strength of your shields. I wasn't sure how well it would work against plasma. I'm glad it did."

"You saved his life," Will remarked softly.

"Sign me up for one," Fred joked.

"Kelly?" Linda said expectantly, still staring down at her gauntleted hands.

Kelly-087 grimaced. "I'm... sorry," she muttered. "I shouldn't have yelled at you." She paused. "Thank you. Like Will said, I guess you saved his life."

The lieutenant put her head against her knees, not wanting to think about the alternative. "I'm just glad he's alive," she murmured.

The Spartans and Kelly remained in silence for a few long minutes. Kelly felt sick. She had never been so worried about anyone before. If John died... She didn't know how she would react. She didn't even want to think about it. He couldn't die. He just couldn't. He was the Master Chief, dammit, he couldn't just up and die. The Spartans needed him. She needed him.

Kelly didn't want to admit how much she cared for John. She knew she did care for him, but she knew it shouldn't go any deeper than that. To think that she could be in love with him... It was unthinkable. No relationship would ever work between a human and a Spartan. Everything Lisa had said was true. John probably didn't even understand what he felt for her, if anything. Maybe she had just been deluding herself thinking that he cared. And how sickening would that be, to have unreturned feelings for someone who risked his life nearly every day? Even that, though, wouldn't be as bad as realizing that yes, she did love him, just for him to die. Why did it have to take something so big for her to realize that? Why hadn't she said something before. Oh, god, what if he did die? What if the last time Kelly saw him would be as he was unconscious, blood seeping through cracks in his battered armor? Kelly lowered her head, trying to keep from vomiting.

"Are you okay?" Linda asked from across the room. Kelly didn't look up, didn't say anything. She couldn't. "Hey, breathe," the Spartan ordered. "Breathe. Kelly, stop thinking and breathe."

Kelly struggled to do as Linda had instructed. Slowly she felt the color return to her face and was able to look up. "Thank you," she whispered.

The quiet Spartan simply nodded in reply, and the door slid open to reveal one of the medical technicians. His white suit was spattered with red blood. John's. Kelly-087 was instantly in front of him. "What's going on?" she demanded.

"Kelly," Will warned as the med tech automatically took a nervous step backwards.

The Spartan in question ignored him. "Well?" she asked impatiently.

Kelly stood. "Will he be okay?" she asked nervously, also moving towards the other human.

"Give him room to talk," Will ordered.

The women each took a step backwards and the man tiredly took a datapad out of his pocket. "We managed to stabilize him, but we're going to have to work quickly. We need to operate if we're going to save him. We're flash cloning replacements for the organs that will need it. I'd tell you more, but I need to get back so that we can start. I just thought you should know that he's stable right now. I'll have someone come tell you the results afterwards. You might as well leave unless you need medical attention. It's going to be a while before we have more information. Spartan-058, they told me you need medical attention too. How badly are you injured?"

"I can wait until you're done with the Chief," Linda said, still not moving.

The med tech hesitated before nodding. "If you're sure."

Linda laughed grimly. "I've got enough biofoam packed in to hold me together. I'll be fine."

"Okay," the man replied reluctantly, obviously wanting to help her. A voice called from inside the operating room, and the med tech turned and left.

"He's stable," Kelly-087 said in relief, moving back to sit against the wall.

Will sighed. "We might as well go. There's nothing we can do now but wait."

"I'm staying," Linda said bluntly. "I have to wait anyway."

"I'm not leaving," Kelly-087 stated, glaring up at Will as if daring him to order her to do any different.

Will started to say something in response, but Linda cut him off.

"Kelly, for the love of god, shut up. I understand that you're scared for the Chief, but that doesn't give you the right to lash out at us. My legs fucking hurt, and I'm really, really not in the mood to take this shit from you."

The other Spartan started to snap back, but stopped. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. Linda nodded silently in reply.

"Fred?" Will asked. "You staying or going?"

Fred hesitated. "I'm staying," he decided, glancing briefly at Kelly-087.

"Lieutenant? You can go if you want. We'll come tell you as soon as we know more," Will offered.

Kelly shook her head. "Thanks, but I'll stay." She waited for one of the Spartans to challenge her, but no one did. Instead, Will merely nodded in agreement, sitting down on the floor. "Well, we might as well get comfortable. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

18. SoulPiercing Green

Chapter 18:

Soul-Piercing Green

John opened his eyes. He considered that in itself a miracle. The other miracle was that the fog was gone. He could see normally again. There was time for him to notice that much before feeling kicked in and the miracles ended. He gasped in pain and that, in turn, caused another wave of agony. "Don't move."

John recognized Linda's voice, and, ignoring both her and the pain, slowly turned to see her. She was in the bed next to his, surrounded the white sheets covering every bed in the medical bay. Under the thin blankets, he could see her legs outlined in something thick, one almost up to her hip. "Are you okay?" John asked, glad to discover that at least talking didn't hurt.

Linda rewarded him with a rare smile. "Typical John. Always worried about your team more than yourself. Yeah," she sighed and stretched, setting her datapad aside, "I'll be fine. I tore my left Achilles' tendon, right and left ACL, right hamstring, and pulled a bunch of other stuff trying to keep up with Kelly on the way back to the rendezvous point."

She grimaced and John couldn't help grinning. "And this is why you're a sniper," he teased, grateful that her injuries weren't as bad as they could have been.

Linda rolled her eyes, running a hand through her short red hair. It had grown longer, and when she did so, it made her head look like it was on fire. John thought the dangerous image suited her. "Well, you won't have your sniper for a while unless you send me out with a Warthog and a guard, and that defeats the whole hidden-sniper purpose. They told me I'll be out for at least two months, probably three, so I figure it'll be maybe one or two."

"Don't push yourself," John warned. "We need you to be able to walk again, and if your legs don't heal properly-."

"Look who's talking," Linda scoffed. "You're the one that needs to not push yourself. So quit looking at me and lay back down." John carefully obeyed as Linda continued. "You have a broken right elbow, broken left humerus, and six broken ribs, one of which punctured your right lung. The cartilage holding together a couple of your ribs was torn, your right scapula got chipped, your sternum was broken, your spine was out of alignment, you had internal bleeding, and to top it all off, you have a moderate to severe concussion. You were in surgery for hours," Linda explained. "They stopped your internal bleeding, set your broken bones, fixed your back, and flash-cloned you a new lung, which is in its proper place now. They would have cloned you a new brain, but your damage wasn't too severe. Besides, there was nothing for them to clone in the first place," the female Spartan said matter-of-factly. John raised an eyebrow. Linda wasn't generally one to joke around. "Kelly's been dying to say that," she explained, grinning slightly. "She's been waiting for you to wake up. We all have." Linda's tone of voice changed, and though John couldn't see her, he knew she was being serious again. "I was afraid you weren't going to. John, you took a direct hit from a Hunter's fuel rod cannon. How are you still alive? The lieutenant said-." At the mention of Kelly's _his_ Kelly's John abruptly remembered everything from that in-between place he had been. He tried to leap into action, wanting to go find her, and a lance of pain shot through him. He fell back onto the bed, gasping involuntarily in pain. "Don't move," Linda ordered firmly. "John, you won't heal properly if you don't just rest for now. I know you want to go find her, but you can't. She'll come to you, trust me. She's been here for a few hours every day. The only one who's been here with you any longer is me. Trust me, John, she'll come back. You'll be able to tell her whatever it is that you need to."

John bit back a moan of pain as he lay back down and forced himself to relax. "What are you talking about?" he asked warily.

Linda sighed, leaning over so she was staring at John. Her sharp green eyes stood out, seeming to almost see right through John, down to his soul. It made him feel uncomfortable. Kelly's green eyes were so much more comfortable... "Don't play that game with me. You know what and who I'm talking about." John remained silent, and Linda continued. "The lieutenant. Kelly Martin, or the other Kelly as some of the Spartans have taken to calling her. She likes you, John," Linda said softly, "and I know you like her too. I wanted to talk to you about that."

John hesitated before giving in. "How do you know that? No offense, but you're not exactly the most gossipy of the Spartans."

"None taken," Linda responded lightly. "I'm not. I don't like being a part of the group. Being a sniper, though, I have to be good at watching people. I've gotten good at it. A lot of the time, I see things no one else does. I can tell you care for her, and she cares for you." John refused to allow himself any feeling of relief or happiness, instead staring straight at the ceiling. He had to hear Linda out before he could pass judgment on what she'd told him so far. There was a pained grunt as Linda moved in the bed next to him. "I'm not wrong in saying that you care for her, am I?"

John almost shook his head, then thought better of it. "No," he admitted softly.

Linda must have nodded, because there was a moment of silence before she continued. "Well, just, be careful, John. She's not like us; she's human. She might expect more from you than you're willing to give" "like, outside of the rules," she clarified hastily. "You know it's not allowed, but I know you and I know you won't break the rules. If you tell her you care, Kelly might expect you to break them for her." John started to speak, but Linda interrupted. "No, you don't have to tell me, I'm just giving you something to think about. "And John... I don't want you to get hurt," the woman said softly. "I know you wouldn't mean to, and I'm sure Kelly wouldn't either, but something could happen. It doesn't matter what, but one or both of you could get hurt. I know Spartans get over emotional pain" "we have to, there's no other choice" "but have you ever felt any kind of emotion this deeply for a single person? And Kelly might not be so easy to heal either. She's going to be a great agent someday, John. I don't want her to get hurt either. I know, I know it happens in every relationship," she explained, "but I don't want to see it happen. So there. I've said my piece, now you can go do whatever you want."

John remained silent for a while, processing everything Linda had said. "Someone has to get hurt in every relationship?" he questioned, hating the idea of doing something to hurt Kelly.

Linda snorted. "You're so naive," she remarked. "Although how would you be anything else, you've been raised by the UNSC. The only way I know anything is by watching everyone else, and you guys don't do that too much. But yeah, people get hurt. That's the way life works. At some point, everyone gets hurt by someone they care about. Like our Kelly." John grimaced, and Linda took that as a cue to continue. "Yeah, I thought you'd figured that one out, at least. Our Kelly's been in love with you since practically day one. She meant what she said when she was drunk. It wasn't just alcohol talking."

"Yeah, I figured," John sighed.

"I'm going to talk to her about it sometime too," Linda said. "I don't think she realizes how much you care for your Kelly, and she's going to end up doing something stupid and mean, and someone is going to get hurt."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" John asked.

Linda sighed. "No, but it's the best I've got," she admitted. "Kelly will be fine. She's strong, she always has been."

"What about me?" Kelly-087's voice came from across the room. John heard footsteps as she and "John guessed" two others came in. He tried to turn slightly, so he could see, and heard a gasp. "John, you're awake!" Kelly-087 exclaimed, running over to him.

Her face appeared in John's field of vision, beaming. He smiled back. "Good call, Kelly. Will, Fred. It's good to see no one else is in here with Linda and me," he said as the two men came into view. They nodded in agreement, both looking a little relieved to see John awake and clearly alive.

"And damn, you landed yourself in here hard," Kelly said quickly. "Your worst injuries were your concussion and your punctured lung. They flash-cloned you a new lung, and they would've given you a new brain but-."

"I already told him," Linda said dryly.

Kelly stuck out her tongue at the other woman. "Why'd you tell him?" she asked, sounding pained, before looking back down at John. "I know it all sounds bad, but don't worry, you'll be back on your feet soon." She continued talking, but while John nodded and talked back, he couldn't focus. His thoughts were consumed by the other Kelly—his Kelly, as Linda had called her. He couldn't wait to get out of here so he could see her and talk to her. He would tell her how he felt. He had to, while he still had a chance.

19. Not So Green

Chapter 19:

Not So Green

Lieutenant Kelly Martin ordered herself to _Just enter the damn med bay_. Unfortunately, she was used to disobeying her own orders. It had been easy enough to visit John when he was unconscious. At first, she'd gone under the pretense of asking Linda questions about the mission: what had gone wrong, how John had gotten injured, what should have been done differently, and so on. Eventually, Kelly had just given up the act and started taking paperwork with her, sitting and working while she waited for John to wake up. She knew he didn't know she was there, but for some reason, Kelly wanted to be near him. It wasn't as if she was doing him any good, or as if she could hope to heal him sooner, but she liked being with him. She and Linda had gotten to know each other too—or at least, Kelly had gotten to know that Linda wasn't generally one for socializing. Such was Kelly's system, and it had worked just fine. Now, however, John was awake.

Nervous didn't even begin to cover how Kelly felt. Her stomach felt all fluttery. She felt pins and needles all over, and this icy feeling in her head and down her spine. She knew she had nothing to be afraid of, but she was anyway. John. She had to talk to him. She had promised herself she was going to talk to him. With him unconscious, it was easy enough to promise that. Awake and alert, however...

"Oh, for the love of god," Maggie muttered, shoving her friend into large room where the Spartan was.

Kelly whirled around, surprised by Maggie's voice, but by then the woman had quickly walked away to check on other patients, leaving Kelly with no choice but to go talk to John. He looked up, hearing her footsteps. Kelly met his eyes and smiled, forcing herself to act naturally. She walked over to him and found her forced smile becoming a natural grin. John was alive. Everything would be okay. "Hey," she greeted the Spartan, taking a seat in the chair beside his bed.

"Hey," he responded, smiling at her.

"It's nice to see you awake, instead of sleeping on the job," Kelly teased before actually looking at the Spartan. He looked horrible. He was covered in bruises, bandages, casts, and fresh pink scars marked healing skin. He looked like he'd been to hell and back. Kelly felt the grin slide off her face. "Holy crap," she murmured. "You look horrible."

"Well, thank god you're pretty enough for both of us," John remarked off-handedly. He quickly continued before Kelly could say anything else. "Yeah, they said it'll be a few months before I'm back in action."

"So you'll be out of here in a couple weeks then?" Kelly joked. "Seriously, though, you need to listen to them. You'll only hurt yourself more if you try to fight before then."

John rolled his eyes. "Does that sound like something I would do?" he asked rhetorically. Kelly laughed and he continued. "You're not the first one that's told me that, either. Linda gave me a whole speech on it earlier."

"Where is she?" Kelly asked, glancing around. "And good. Maybe you'll listen to her."

The Spartan shrugged slightly before wincing. "Out and about somewhere with the staff," he said vaguely.

Kelly automatically reached out to touch him, wanting to help after seeing him in pain. "Hey, don't try to move," she advised. "Is there anything I can do? Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good," John said, carefully moving so that he was more directly facing Kelly. "Hey, um, Kelly," he began slowly. "Why did you tell me to follow their orders about staying here again?"

"I said, because I don't want you to hurt yourself more," Kelly repeated, confused and slightly nervous about where the Spartan might be going with his train of thought.

"Well, why don't you, uh, want me to get hurt?" John continued, stumbling awkwardly over his words.

Kelly thought about what she said before speaking. "Well, I just, I mean, I want you to be safe. I don't want you to die," she said carefully. "The thought of you getting hurt scares me."

"Why does that scare you?" John pressed.

"The same reason you were scared when that elite was charging me," Kelly replied after a pause. "John-."

"Kelly-," John said at the same time. They both paused, each waiting for the other to continue. The Spartan finally did so. "I don't know the best way to say this, or the best way to do any of this. I've never done this before, and I don't know what I'm doing. I have this feeling like I'm scared again, but I don't know why. Kelly, I almost died back there. The only reason I'm talking to you now at all is because of you; you saved my life. But I realized something in

between life and death, something I promised myself I would tell you. I..." John hesitated, and Kelly felt the icy feeling of excited fear again. "I care for you, Kelly, more than I probably should. I have... feelings for you, and I don't want you to get hurt. I want you to be safe, and I want to be the one to protect you," John said slowly. "I guess that's it. I just... I just wanted you to know. I promised myself I would tell you, considering I might not get another chance. So that's all. You don't have to say anything, I just wanted... needed to tell you." Finished, the Spartan checked the wrap on his left bicep in an attempt to keep from feeling too awkward.

Kelly felt a thrill of happiness spread through her and a smile involuntarily broke out on her face. "John," she whispered softly. "Are you serious?"

He nodded nervously. Kelly's smile widened and she nearly laughed, she felt so completely overjoyed. "i can't believe it," she whispered, volume of her voice gradually increasing as she talked. "I know exactly what you mean, I was so scared when you got hurt, I was afraid you were going to die, and I realized I should have told you before, I could have told you so many different times that I cared, but I didn't know what to say, I didn't know how to say it, I was scared of what you'd say, I mean, even after Lisa told me she thought you felt the same way, there's no way to tell for certain, and I'm babbling, aren't I," she stopped herself, grimacing. John just grinned up at her. Despite his injuries, he looked happier than Kelly had ever seen him. "I'm sorry, I know I'm being silly," Kelly apologized, sounding embarrassed. "I'm just happy, you know?"

The Spartan started to nod before remembering his injuries. "Yeah, I know," he agreed. "And don't apologize. I think it's cute."

Kelly giggled, shaking her head. "You're crazy," she teased.

"I'm a Spartan. Crazy comes with the job description."

"No, that would be the ODS'Ts," Kelly corrected, shaking her head at the sheer insanity of the volunteer-only group. "Helljumpers."

John's expression darkened slightly, and Kelly leaned forward, suddenly worried. "Hey, are you okay? What is it? Did I say something? Are you hurt?" "I mean, worse? Can I get you anything?"

He grinned slightly at her concern. "No, I'm fine. It's just... The ODS'Ts and Spartans have never gotten along well," he said carefully.

"Why not?" Kelly asked, confused.

John hesitated, but before he could respond, the doors to the room opened and Linda appeared, bed being wheeled in by a member of the medical staff. The female Spartan looked extremely annoyed at the indignity of not being able to get around on her own. "We'll talk later, okay?" John suggested quickly.

Kelly nodded. "Yeah, definitely," she agreed. "Hi Linda."

"You're next," Linda told John crossly, flashing a brief smile at Kelly, who stood.

"I guess I'll get out of your way then. I'll see you guys later," she smiled at Linda and John. Her soft green eyes met John's for a moment. "I'm glad you're awake, John," she said sincerely, turning to leave just after seeing John's heartfelt smile in return. Despite the work she had to do, despite the Covenant, even despite John's injuries, Kelly couldn't have been as upset as Linda if she tried. She felt like everything in her life was finally falling into place. She was getting stronger with John's help. She was actually being useful in the field for once. She was aiming better, thanks to Lisa. For once, Kelly felt like an actually useful ONI agent. Maybe she wasn't so green after all. And now, to top it all off, she and John had admitted to each other that there was something between them. It wasn't just Kelly hoping to see some hint of emotion, he had told her. Kelly couldn't stop smiling. She felt as if life couldn't possibly get any better.

20. Emotionally Green

Chapter 20:

Emotionally Green

"So what's a girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Kelly laughed. "How'd you hear a line like that?" she asked. "I thought all of you Spartans were super sheltered. You mean to tell me you've seen an old-fashioned movie?"

The Spartan in question grinned lazily, leaning back against the wall. John was in Kelly's room, and they were just talking. She sat somewhat facing him, and her legs were crossed over his. He felt content and more peaceful than he had in a long time. He was still healing, but he'd been let out of the med bay that morning. "Take it easy," one of the med techs had warned him. "You've been benched for the next two months. Don't do anything that would require too much action." John wasn't happy about it—he wanted to be on the ground with his team—but Fred was in charge, and John trusted him. Fred would do a good job leading in John's absence. For now, John's biggest problem was not worrying. Kelly was excellent at helping with that, though, which was part of the reason why John was with her. He knew it was more than that, though. He just loved talking to her. He felt peaceful. "You'd be surprised," he admitted. "We weren't always the good kids we are now. A few years ago, Kelly broke into one of the rec centers and stole an old disk. It had that line in it, and I've always wanted an excuse to use it. So, Lieutenant Kelly Martin," John continued, enjoying the sound of her full name and rank, "what is a girl like you doing in a place like this? How did you get involved with the UNSC?"

"Well, it's not a very exciting story," Kelly warned him. "I led a pretty boring life until I was assigned to you guys."

John smiled. "Good. I want to hear all about your normal, boring life before you met us."

Kelly sighed, smiling. "Alright. You asked for it. Where to begin... Well, I guess I really got into languages because of my parents. My mom was originally from 23 Librae, so my parents raised me to be

bilingual. I picked up languages pretty easily as I grew up. Something about them just clicked with me. My dad was the one that got me into computers and technology. He owned and operated this small programming business, and taught me how to program when I was little. He explained that it was really just like another language, only it never changes, never devolves into unintelligible dialects based on location. I remember when I showed him the first program I ever designed. It was simple, really, just designed to turn on and off lights from a phone. Someone reinvents a new one every few years. It wasn't anything special. But he acted like it was the most amazing thing in the world," Kelly remembered, smiling sadly. "He was a great man."

John felt a pang of loss. He'd barely known his parents. Would they have been as proud of him as Kelly's parents obviously were? If they knew that he was still alive, fighting for humanity, would they be proud? Or disgusted? Did Kelly even really understand what he did? What did she think of it? "Was?" John asked carefully.

Kelly nodded sadly. "He died in 2520 of cancer. He was a great man."

"Sounds like it," John agreed. He was silent for a moment out of respect for Kelly before he continued. "So how did you get involved with the UNSC?"

She shrugged. "Just what worked out best. Money was always tight, and the UNSC offered to pay for school and give me a job. I mean, except for the field work part, I'm good for my job. Twenty years ago, I would have been invaluable. Now, though, with all of these AIs—" Kelly sighed. "That's pretty much all there is to my story, though. Well, until I was assigned to your squad," she teased, nudging John with her foot. "Since then, my life has been nothing but rainbows and sunshine."

"Just imagine how nice it is to have had those rainbows and sunshine every day of our lives," John joked, trying to make light of everything that he and his Spartans had been through.

Kelly's expression was instantly serious. "What about your childhood?" she asked. "I mean, you told me you haven't seen your family since you were six, you were operated on—" What else did they do to you? I mean, if you don't mind telling me," she added, sounding almost shy.

"No, I don't mind," John reassured her quickly before beginning his own story. "I was conscripted by the UNSC when I was six. My memory is pretty much blank before then. I vaguely remember meeting Dr. Halsey a couple of weeks before I was taken. When we were all gathered for the first time, she made it sound like such a noble task—" 'Called upon to serve'," the Spartan repeated quietly, struggling to remember. "They made us train as hard as the normal recruits. Harder, sometimes. Kelly, Sam, and I were friends from the beginning. That was when Kelly had blue hair." John laughed softly, and Kelly grinned at the mental image of the female Spartan with such strangely-colored hair. "They gave us the operations when we were fourteen. Only thirty-two of us made it through intact. So many died—" And there were others, too. They survived, but their bodies were destroyed so they couldn't fight. Have you ever seen anything authored by Fhadjad?"

Kelly paused before nodding thoughtfully, eyes filled with horror. "You mean he's-."

John nodded. "Yeah," he said heavily. "He's a Spartan. He's brilliant still, but his bodyâ€¦ it doesn't work like it's supposed to. So he and the others got pushed into ONI. I've seen them around from time to timeâ€¦ But I almost don't want to. Is that bad of me?" he asked Kelly, needing to hear an answer. "It hurts to see them like that, to know that they could have been fighting with the rest of us. It doesn't seem fair that they're the ones that got stuck like this while I'm better than I could ever have been. Why are they like that, and not me? Whyâ€¦"

Kelly hesitantly moved towards John, laying her hand on his arm. "No, I don't think that's bad at all," she said slowly. "It makes perfect sense. And John, I can't tell you why you made it and they didn't. I guess you're just luckyâ€¦" His pain was echoed in her eyes, but John only put his head in his hands.

"Why," he groaned. It was the first time he'd ever truly allowed himself to think about everything that had happened, and he felt like a piece of him was breaking. It wasn't fair. What turn of fate had made it possibleâ€"or morally acceptableâ€"for one Spartan to thrive while another merely survived in a broken body? The muscles in John's arms tightened as he struggled to control himself again. Once he finally had, he continued, still looking down at the floor rather than at Kelly. "Some of us just took to the operations better. Sam was one of the bestâ€¦ experiments. He adjusted the quickest, and was stronger than any of us. Kelly was at the other end of the spectrum. At first, we didn't think she was going to make it. She lost so much weight, her hair stopped growing for a whileâ€¦ But she pulled through. I was somewhere in the middle," John shrugged before continuing on to other dark memories. "I was the first one to try to go back into the gym after the operations. Everything felt too light. A few ODSTs came in. I'd taken one of the pins from the bench press bar and forgotten to replace it. The first one to try it dropped the bar. They surrounded me, wanting to teach me a lesson. Their sergeant came in, told us we might as well fightâ€¦" The Spartan was whispering now, voice sounding almost broken as he allowed himself to feel in a way that he never had before. There had never been time nor reason. "I killed two of those men, and that's the heart of the reason the ODSTs and Spartans don't get along," he said feverishly, finally meeting Kelly's green eyes. "I killed innocent soldiers who just wanted to help protect humanity. I'm a murderer, Kelly. I have more blood on my hands than you have any idea. Everything was so clear-cut back then. Their sergeant told us to fight, so it was a mission. Everything, fucking everything was a mission in my eyes, and they were the enemy. I neutralized them, because that's what I had been trained to do. Our first real mission. We had to infiltrate an Insurrectionist base and capture their leader. Kelly, Linda, Sam, Fred and I. It was just last year. We went in, and yeah, we succeeded, we accomplished our mission, but do you know how many innocent civilians were killed during that?" John's throat burned with pent-up emotions, but he didn't know how to relieve them. "I'm a murderer, Kelly, plain and simple."

"John," she whispered. "John, look at me." He couldn't move, couldn't look at her. He couldn't do anything but try to control himself, and he could barely do that. He felt like the rookies he'd seen so often

in the field, stunned by their first bloodshed in the field. Unable to do anything but stare at their weapon or themselves, unable to believe what horrible things they were were able to do. "John. Oh, John," Kelly murmured, moving closer to him. She hesitantly reached out and wrapped her arms around him. John hugged her back, carefully holding her. His muscles strained to hold her as tightly as he could, but he knew that would hurt her. He didn't want to hurt her. "John, you're not a murderer," Kelly said softly, mindlessly running her fingers over his short hair as she tried to calm him. "You were just doing what you were ordered to do. You didn't kill any of those people because you wanted to, did you?"

John shook his head. "No," he whispered, still trying to get himself under control. "They were the enemy. That doesn't make them any less human though."

"No, you're right, it doesn't," Kelly agreed calmly. "But John, if you were truly a bad person, you would have killed them because you wanted too. You were just following orders. You did what you thought was right; you did what you thought you had to to protect people from the Insurrectionists. You're not a murderer." John remained silent. "John, look at me," Kelly ordered, tilting his head up and forcing him to do so. "You are not a murderer," she said firmly. "Don't you ever think that. Because you aren't. Okay?"

He wasn't sure if he believed her, but he wanted to. He wanted to so badly. "Okay," John said, nodding. "Okay." He struggled to pull himself together. Not a murderer. Not a murderer. He kept repeating it to himself, hearing an echo of Kelly's voice saying the words. Not a murderer. The Spartan finally managed to control himself. He hugged Kelly tightly one more time before releasing her. She stayed close to him, however. He could feel her warmth, and smelled some kind of sweet scent from her. John took a deep breath and managed to look at Kelly, this time without her help. "I guess I wasâ€¦ relieved when the Covenant came along," he admitted. "If I had really stopped and thought about it before nowâ€¦ I don't know if I could have killed another human. The lines are never clear-cut. Nothing is ever black and white, life isn't that simple," John realized, thinking aloud. "We're all fighting to protect our own. Just because they believe differently doesn't make them the enemy. The Covenant, though..." The Spartan shook his head. "They're different. They're not fighting because they believe in something, they're not fighting to protect their race, they're just trying to annihilate us. They're not human," he said, tone of voice more harsh than he had meant. Next to him, Kelly wavered, looking unsure as to whether or not she wanted to say something. "Am I wrong?" John asked.

Kelly hesitated again. "No," she said finally. The Spartan didn't buy it, just looking at her. "Maybe," she carefully changed her answer. John kept watching her, and she quickly tried to explain. "Well, I mean, look at the facts. They have a highly evolved caste system among their species. That has to be indicative of a higher intelligence, right? And their language is amazing! They're at least as evolved as we are. More, even, I mean, look at their equipment! The shields on your armor are adapted from theirs. We are learning from them, not the other way around. They're intelligent creatures, John, and they feel too, I mean, you've seen how they react when their kind are killed. Maybe they're more than the dumb creatures we give them credit for," Kelly explained earnestly. "There has to be a reason they're attacking us. I mean, so

much of their language is religious references, maybe it has something to do with that. Maybe we've done something to offend them, I don't know, but if we could just talk to them, maybe try to work it all out-. There has to be a reason-."

"No." John's voice was deadly serious. After all the doubts he had voiced earlier, this was one topic about which he was absolutely certain. "No. They're aliens, Kelly, they're not human. Don't try to make them something they're not. Have you not seen what they've done?" He pulled himself away from Kelly and stood, pacing back and forth in the small room. "Kelly, they're animals. They're killing people, destroying planets, god, the jackals even eat people sometimes. And you want to reason them?" The Spartan laughed shortly. "No. You're wrong."

"No, you're wrong." Kelly's strong reply surprised John. Not many people dared to disagree with a Spartan. He turned to see her kneeling, arms crossed stubbornly. "You're being closed minded simply because you don't want to think of the alternative. John," she said softly, relaxing her posture, "I don't want to argue. Just... think about it sometime? Please?"

John tensed up, running his hands through his short hair as he tried to calm down. He took a deep breath, and some of Kelly's sweet scent reached him. Abruptly, he was able to relax. He didn't want to be fighting with her. The Spartan took another deep breath before looking over at Kelly. "Okay," he agreed. "I'll think about it." He went back over to the bed and sat down next to her again.

Kelly smiled up at him. "Thank you," she said simply.

John nodded. "Can you tell me another story from your childhood?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Of course," she replied cheerfully. "What do you want to hear about? I could tell you about the time I broke my arm, or the one year I went to summer camp, or..."

Kelly fell silent, thinking, and John regarded her thoughtfully. "You're so open," he remarked.

"Excuse me?" Kelly asked, train of thought interrupted.

The Spartan shrugged. "At least from what I've seen. You're either quiet and keep to yourself, not talking to anyone, or you're so friendly and talkative and outgoing. You don't do anything halfway. When you get to know someone, you have no secrets. You're so... You're just so friendly, Kelly."

She laughed. "I can't help it. I've been told I should try before. People are nice to me just out of politeness and then I bore them with my life's story. I don't mean to be annoying..."

"You're not," John clarified quickly. "Not at all. I was just pointing it out. I mean, it's one of the things I like about you," he forced himself to admit slowly.

Kelly couldn't help grinning. "Oh, okay. I see how it is," she teased. "So tell me, John, what else is it that you like about me?"

The Spartan froze for a second. "Um, well, I mean, uh, there's your, uh, eyes," he managed to say, stumbling over the words.

Kelly laughed. "John, I'm kidding. You don't have to say anything. I wouldn't be that mean, to seriously ask you something like that."

"Oh thank god," John sighed, exaggerating his relief in a successful attempt to make Kelly laugh.

"There's more to you than meets the eye too," she commented, smiling up at him. "You seem so quiet and serious, but you're not. You're funny, and brilliantly smart, and a good leader... And human. You're more human than so many people realize," Kelly murmured seriously.

She looked so...perfect, just smiling up at him. Her green eyes were opened wide, staring into his own. Her lips still curved into a slight smile... A shiver of fear passed through John as he realized what he should do next-what he wanted to do next. Hesitantly, he leaned down towards Kelly. She moved to meet him halfway, but just before their lips could meet, there was a pounding on the door.

"Master Chief, they need you in the Ops center!" a voice yelled loudly.

John and Kelly jerked awkwardly apart. "I'm sorry, I have to go," John said, reluctantly moving away from Kelly and standing.

Kelly shrugged, offering a reluctant half-smile. "Duty calls." She stood and took a step towards John. They both hesitated awkwardly before Kelly extended her arms and they embraced. John decided he loved the feeling of her in his arms. She seemed so fragile, and he could protect her when she was so close. "Mmm," Kelly murmured happily. "Do that again sometime, okay?"

John grinned down at her. "Absolutely," he promised. "But for now, I have to go."

Kelly nodded into his chest before releasing him. "Go," she ordered. "I'll see you later."

"Yes, you will," the Spartan agreed before leaving. His team on the ground needed him in the Ops room, and he would be there to help. He cared for Kelly, but his duty came first. It had to.

21. Green Team

Chapter 21:

Green Team

"So, I've decided what this reminds me of," Kelly-087 remarked, side-stepping an Elite with an energy sword. Quickly, before it had a chance to react, she grabbed the wrist holding the sword and snapped the arm back, breaking the whatever-these-creatures-had-instead-of-an-elbow joint and driving

the blade into its owner's neck. The creature roared at her in fury, but she was already gone, sprinting off again.

"What does this remind you of?" Linda-063 asked distractedly over the private com channel the two women were using.

Kelly heard the crack of Linda's sniper rifle and another sword-wielding Elite in her path fell. "Thanks," she said cheerfully. "And it's like one of the Capture the Flag games they used to make us play with the Drill Instructors back in training, remember? Those were so much fun. Vinh always made it her personal goal to disable the cameras whenever they tried to film us and see how we were beating them, remember? Good times."

"Kelly, focus," Linda ordered. "We're not playing Capture the Flag and the Elites aren't DIs. They will kill you. They're not going for a flag, they're going for you. Keep your mind now, not five years ago."

"I am," Kelly retorted lightly. She quickly raised her pistol, not bothering to sight down its scope as she shot two suicide Grunts in the head before they could get too close. As the bullets neatly impacted their heads, she imagined a spray of confetti and cheers. One time, long years ago, Sam had rigged the practice dummies to explode into brightly colored paper when they were shot in the head. From then on, Kelly had been unable to get a perfect headshot without remembering that incident. Now, though, her memory was tinged with sorrow. If only Sam was here—_Focus_, she reminded herself, forcing her thoughts out of the past and onto her mission. She was on the ground nearly alone (at least for now) and she was running, running as fast as she could. Kelly was proud of her title as the fastest Spartan, but she rarely was given the chance to reach her top speed. Racing the others was one thing, but out here, with enemies that promised to shoot her should she remain in one place for too long—_The adrenaline rush combined with her formidable skills nearly gave her wings. Kelly switched to her assault rifle and quickly riddled an Elite with bullets before speeding on again.

The planet Reception. It looked beautiful, or at least, it had before the Covenant landed. Kelly wasn't here to sightsee though. She was paying someone a visit instead. Apparently ONI had intercepted some transmission that when translated, said some big-shot Covvie was going to be on the planet. Kelly didn't know why and she didn't know any more about this leader than that it was called a "Prophet" and was ugly as hell. But it was supposedly here, and the Spartans were going to try to capture it or—_failing that—kill it. Hence the similarities to Capture the Flag. Only the Spartans were trying to capture one of the enemies, not a flag which could be used to beat down enemies if the situation got _really_ desperate. But Kelly was on her typical CTF duty, which meant being the rabbit and creating a diversion while Linda sniped, covering her. They were the designated Green team for the mission, even though Linda couldn't really move from where she was posted on a rooftop. She had a Marine "bodyguard" with her, and a Hornet for getting her, the Marine, and Kelly back to the Pelicans when this was all over. Isaac and Vinh (Red team) were also distracting, only to a different degree. They had captured two of the Banshee fliers and were creating hell for everything else in the air. The rest of the Spartans (Blue team) were trying to go in silently from another point. If Kelly, Linda, Isaac, and Vinh were successful, the others would hopefully be able to at least get in

without being noticed. Extraction would be a little bit more of a problem, but the Spartans were prepared to fight their way out if nothing else worked. Their target was on one of the huge ships blocking out the sky above the city. Surveillance reported that it was anchored to the planet with some kind of "gravity lift," which the Spartans would theoretically use to board the ship. Once they were on board, they would locate this "Prophet," kidnap it, and (again, theoretically) commandeer one of the Covenant's small fighters in the hangar bay that had to be on the ship. That was Plan A. Plan B was to simply kill the Prophet and fight their way out. It probably wouldn't work very well, but it would suffice. Blue team was to keep radio silence in case the Covenant had figured out how to hack into the signal. Green and Red teams, on the other hand, had been told to use as much radio chatter as they could. That was why Kelly was bothering Linda, who usually hated to be disturbed while sniping.

"I mean, it really is like old time CTF," Kelly continued, slowing her step to glance around the corner of a partially destroyed building. A Grunt was seated at a turret, and Kelly waited for Linda to take it out before she rounded the corner, guns blazing. "We're Green team, well, I mean, you and I are especially, but all of us are Green team. And these _uglies_-" Kelly punctuated the word by pistol-whipping a Jackal, killing both it and its shield, "are Red team. Some of them even _look_ like the DIs used to."

"Isn't it supposed to be Blue team and Red team?" Linda asked, sounding unfocused.

"Well, yeah, but we can't just say we're blue now, I mean, look at our lovely green armor," Kelly pointed out. "I have to say, I rather like the color. It's better than some of the outfits we've had to wear for undercover missions. We're a lot more stylish than the ODSTs, too."

"Kellyâ€¦" Linda sighed.

"I mean, especially for you. The whole green armor, green eyes thing. You're totally gonna stun some soldier some day when you save his ass and he comes over to thank you and you pull off your helmet and he figures out that you're a woman, and he'll fall in love with you instantly and you'll get married and live happily ever after." Kelly glanced quickly back in Linda's direction and swiped her pistol across her faceplate in a Spartan smile.

"Kelly, don't you _dare_ do that again." For the first time, Linda's voice had emotion in it. "You know that pistol could go off and shield or no shield, at point blank, we would have no more Rabbit. I know I hate you sometimes, but I _would_ miss you if you died." The sniper sighed, and when she spoke again, it was once again in her standard cool tone. "And it was a nice story, but you know the truth as well as I do. Spartans can't live happily ever after." The finality of her sentence was emphasized by the sound of another clip snapping into her sniper rifle.

Kelly growled in frustration. "I wouldn't have shot myself and you know it," she said. "And if Spartans can't live happily ever after, what's John doing with the lieutenant?" There was silence over the com, punctuated by the crack of the rifle. "Linda?"

"I honestly don't know," the other Spartan admitted after another minute of silence. "But whatever he's doing, it's his choice. As long as it doesn't endanger the team or the mission, we shouldn't interfere."

"Understood," Kelly agreed, not sure what to think about that. Instead, she linked com channels with Isaac and Vinh for a moment. They were both laughing when Kelly tuned in. "How goes it, Red team?" she asked.

"It goes great, Rabbit," Vinh replied, sounding cheerful. "How goes rabbitting?"

"Rabbitting goes wonderfully, uh, Air Strike?" Kelly suggested.

"I'll take it," Vinh decided.

There was a slight pop of static as Linda joined the channel. "Red team, Rabbit, you three are altogether too carefree about com chatter on missions," she said, sounding slightly annoyed.

"I know," Isaac agreed. "I make sure Vinh stays on track just like you do for Kelly, don't worry, Green-Eyed Ghost."

"That's good," Kelly mused.

Vinh laughed. "Definitely."

Kelly paused to glance around another building, grimacing as she noticed the blue-grey tank-like creature. "Green-2, I have Hunters," she reported.

"We'll let you focus then," Isaac suggested.

Kelly flashed her acknowledgement light. "Good luck, Red team."

"Same," Vinh replied quickly, and Kelly and Linda switched back to their own channel.

"You know what to do," Linda said, sounding entirely focused.

Kelly's light flashed again in agreement, and she burst out from her cover, firing rapidly to draw the Hunter pair's attention. They turned as one to face her, hunkering down behind their massive shields. Feeling dangerous, Kelly darted close enough to kick one before zipping back out of range. The Hunters' eerie silence kept her from trying that again. She knew Linda would disapprove, too. Kelly kept moving, firing in bursts to keep the pair's attention on her. The eerie green glow of a plasma cannon charging emanated from behind one's shield, and Kelly instinctively threw herself out of the way, hitting the ground and rolling. When she stood again, she spared a glance over to see a smoking, charred circle on the ground where she had been standing. The Hunters turned to face her new location, presenting the orange stripes of unprotected skin on their backs to Linda. Her sniper rifle cracked once, twice, three times, then four, and the second target barely had time to howl in pain before it met its brother in death. "Nice shooting," Kelly said appreciatively

before Fred's voice came over the com.

"This is Blue-1. We have reached our targeted location. Red-1 and -2, Green-1, make your way to us ASAP. Green-2, meet up with the Pelican and get back to the _Commonwealth_."

"Understood," Kelly, Linda, Isaac, and Vinh all said at the same time.

"Man, are we well-trained or what?" Kelly joked.

Fred did not sound amused. "Cut the unnecessary chatter, Green-1." Kelly sighed to herself. Fred was fun off the field, but while on a mission— "New number designations," he continued. "Green-1, Red-1, and Red-2, you are now Blue-28, -29, and -30, respectively. We'll be waiting when you get here."

"Roger that," Kelly replied. She turned, zooming her HUD to see Linda climbing into the cockpit of the Hornet. As soon as she had taken off, Marine riding on the runner, Kelly turned towards the marker Fred had dropped on their location. She rolled her shoulders, clearing her mind before taking off. Unlike her previous run, now Kelly didn't stop to shoot. She dodged anything—and any_one—in her path, racing to beat Isaac and Vinh to the rest of Blue team. Glancing up for a second, she saw two Banshees swoop down towards her. Kelly automatically checked her stride, and was rewarded when the clutch of Grunts and Elite leader blocking her path were hosed down with plasma fire. She nodded in thanks to her teammates, pushing off from the ground again. After about fifteen seconds of solid sprinting, a break in the buildings revealed a glowing pink-purple column of light. Kelly pushed herself around one more corner before seeing the tell-tale green armor. She slowed to a stop, breathing hard. Fred nodded at her from his position next to the light column. "Good work, Blue-28," he told the female Spartan. Kelly nodded back, still trying to catch her breath. Two Banshees clumsily landed and skidded to a halt, Vinh and Isaac jumping out. Fred issued a series of commands, and the rest of Blue team returned from patrolling the small area the Spartans had cleared. "Let's go," he ordered, stepping into the beam of light. The others immediately followed him, some looking more reluctant than others. Kelly was a member of the second party; as a rabbit, she loved having her feet on the ground and hated zero-gee situations. Orders were orders though, and the thing looked perfectly safe, lifting the Spartans off the ground and raising them higher and higher until they disappeared into the belly of the ship above them. Kelly was put in mind of a monster swallowing its prey. As her feet lifted off the ground, she couldn't shake the sudden feeling that something was going to go wrong. Something didn't feel right, and the Spartans were headed into a place as close to hell as they could get. The ship grew until she could no longer see past its edges to the sky behind it. Darkness enveloped her as she was swallowed up, and Kelly instinctively brought her rifle to its ready position. "Close your eyes at the top," Fred's voice came over the com, but the order came a second too late for Kelly. A bright flash obscured her vision.

"It's empty," Grace stated, sounding confused. Kelly blinked, trying to clear her vision. Once she could see again, she noted that the other Spartan was right. The large room the Spartan team was in was, in fact, eerily empty.

Will spoke up next. "Listen." The Spartans obeyed, and Kelly could barely pick out the sound of the enginesâ€”increasing in volume. The purplish glow from the end of the gravity lift abruptly disappeared, and the ship jerked upward.

"Not very good drivers, are they?" Kelly muttered.

Vinh laughed softly, but Fred ignored her, issuing orders again. "We're on a schedule now. We cannot be on the ship when they move into Slipstream Space. If the Covenant doesn't know we're here, they will soon." He pulled out his datapad and accessed a map on it. "The bridge is in the center of the ship, and the Prophet will most likely be there. We'll split into two groups. I'll lead the first team, and Will, you lead the second." Fred highlighted a list of names and assigned each Spartan a group. Kelly was under Will's command, and she wondered for a second if it was because she had been annoying Fred so much lately. But no, he wouldn't be that unprofessional. "Let's move out, Spartans." The two teams moved towards a door at one end of the room, which silently slid open for them. A large, dimly-lit passageway was revealed, and Fred's team went right while Will and his group went left. Kelly took point without needing to be told, making sure the way was clear for the Spartans. She needn't have bothered, however. The walkways were empty, disturbingly so. After nearly two minutes of silently moving through deserted hallways, Fred's voice came over the com. "We've reached the bridge. Will, have you run into any Covvies on the ship?"

"Negative-," Will responded, but was cut off by a flurry of other voices, Fred's louder than the others.

"The entire ship is deserted, the bridge is no different. It's a trap, they must have realized we would be sent in if we thought there was a Prophet in reach-."

"They laid a trap for us?" Will exclaimed in disbelief.

A nav marker appeared, flashing, on all of the Spartans' HUDs. As one, the team broke into a run. Knowing where they were going now, they reached the bridge in seconds. Fred had stationed a few on the doors in case any Covvies did show up, but that looked doubtful. The bridge was indeed devoid of life, red warning signs flashing on the holographic screens. Kelly took the whole situation in instantaneously, uncharacteristic fear rising in her for the first time on that entire mission. Most of the symbols were completely alien to the Spartan, but she recognized one from the lessons the lieutenant had been giving them: self-destruct. "You might run into this one on a few of the weapons," she had explained, holographically projecting the character into the air. "Many of them will self-destruct when their owners drop them. We believe their ships have self-destruct mechanisms too, although it is less likely that you will run into this symbol in that situation. It is a good one to know, however." _Less likely, but unfortunately not impossible_, Kelly thought, disbelief coloring the thought. The Covenant had laid a trap for the Spartans. Harder to believe, it had worked. They had blindly walked right in.

Fred was already talking to John via video link through the datapad. Kelly could see his face and hear the two men conversing quickly. The world around her seemed almost blurry for a second. How had this happened? Were they really _all_ going to die here? John suddenly

broke into a yell, turning away from the camera on his end. "Someone go get Kelly! Go, now!"

At the sound of his voice, Kelly snapped out of it, surveying the stations around her. She moved over to the closest one, analyzing it for any more Covenant symbols she knew. _Speed, Altitude,_ no, wrong station. She went over to another, noticing Maria, Grace, Will, and Isaac doing the same thing she was. "Found it," Isaac called after a long minute. Fred was almost instantly at his side, and Kelly and the others joined the men. "I don't see any _Stop_ or _Reverse_, or anything," Isaac said helplessly.

"Kelly's here," John's voice came quickly from the datapad, and the woman's face filled the screen.

"Point the camera at the symbols," she ordered, sounding as tense as Kelly felt. Fred obeyed silently. The lieutenant could be heard mumbling under her breath, reading symbols off. "Dammit, no, there's nothing here. Let me see the view screens." Fred turned the datapad again, and the lieutenant cursed again. "Get out of here now. It still registers having escape pods-."

A dull thump resounded through the ship, and the symbols on the screen changed. Panic tried to fill Kelly, but she took a deep breath, forcing it down. "So, no escape pods," she said calmly.

The other Kelly assented. "Probably whoever set this up getting off the ship. There might be something in the hangar, but it's doubtful. I would suggest heading that way, even if there isn't anything there, you can get off the ship that way. You're outside of the atmosphere now. Your suits have zero-gee, just get off the ship as soon as you can in whatever way you can, and we can send out a Pelican to pick you up?" The lieutenant made it sound like a question, looking back at John for confirmation. He must have nodded, because she repeated the end of her sentence again, sounding more sure of herself this time. "Who's the fastest?"

Kelly stepped forward as Fred acknowledged her. "Give her the datapad," the lieutenant ordered. "087 can give me more time to look around and see if we can stop this still. If not, she should still be able to get off of the ship in time."

"Kelly?" Fred asked. He was giving her the chance to back out, Kelly understood. She would be cutting it close if she did this, closer than any of the other Spartans. There was a very real chance she might not make it. But if she could help preserve the shipâ€¦ They might be able to save so many othersâ€¦

"Give me the datapad," she told him. "And get out of here."

Fred nodded, handing over the device. "Let's move out," he ordered, and the Spartans sprinted off the bridge, leaving Kelly alone, her only company thousands of miles away.

"Show me some of the other stations," the lieutenant said, and Kelly obeyed numbly.

"You'll need to tell me when I have to get off here," she informed the woman. "I want to go out with a bang, sure, but this wasn't quite the way I had it planned."

Kelly recognized the sound of John letting out a bark of laughter in the background, but the lieutenant didn't even crack a grin, just nodding seriously. She was focused on her work, which Kelly realized she should probably be grateful for. If the agent didn't give her full attention to translating, Kelly was more than likely going to die here. And she hadn't lied, either. This wasn't how she wanted to die. The Spartan slowly moved the camera on the datapad to point at different stations, giving the lieutenant time to translate. At two minutes, Fred dropped a nav marker on the hangar bay for Kelly to get to when she was done on the bridge. At just over five minutes, the lieutenant shook her head. "There's nothing," she said helplessly. "They must have a different system, there's no way of going back from self-destruct. Thanks for trying, but get out of here, now."

"Understood," Kelly responded. She took one last look at the device's screen before abandoning it and running. If she was going to die now, she wanted to have John's face fresh in her memory. It seemed unfair any other way.

The frequent ninety-degree turns in the passageways of the ship kept Kelly from reaching her full speed, and even at a slightly slower rate, she slammed into a couple of walls, unable to keep from skidding. After almost half a minute, Kelly reached the doors to the hangar. The ship's engines, which had been steadily working on pushing the ship into space, suddenly began to roar, overloading as they were designed to be able to do. Kelly felt the floor shudder as explosions began to tear through the ship. The hangar was a flat, open stretch of floor, though, and Kelly did what she was designed to do: run. She pushed off the ground as hard as she could, sprinting as if her life depended on it towards the open doors to space—and her life did, in fact, depend on it. Time seemed to slow as she reached the edge. Heat blossomed behind her, and rather than push off, Kelly was thrown into space. Her armor heated and cracked, shields overloading. At the last second before the heart of the explosion enveloped her, the Spartan triggered the overshield the lieutenant had installed on her armor. Then the noiseless heat and fire washed over her. The green bar drained in an instant, but Kelly didn't want to know what would have happened if she hadn't used it. The fire receded quickly, and Kelly waited an agonizing second to see if her armor was still airtight. Miraculously it was, and she could finally catch her breath, unable to do more than float helplessly. The alien ship drifted dead in space, being pulled back into Reception's gravity now that the engines no longer guided its actions. Kelly looked around to see the rest of the Spartans, and quickly counted to thirty before she realized she had been holding her breath again. They had all made it out alive. No one had been left behind like Sam. Kelly slowly relaxed, watching as two Pelicans sped out from the Commonwealth's hangar bay and began to collect the Spartans. Their mission had been a trap, revealing intelligence that they had formerly believed the Covenant did not possess. This would change how the Spartans did everything. There would be plans rethought, transmissions reanalyzed, and traps laid for Covenant troops in the future. For now, though, the Spartans were all alive, and that was the only thing that mattered to Kelly.

Chapter 22:

Truly Green

"I love you."

The words were barely breathed, so quiet that she almost couldn't hear them herself. She knew John would, though, and he was the only one that mattered. The thrill of fear that accompanied the dangerous words raced through her as she waited in nervous anticipation to hear the reply. Where she was expecting to hear the same words back and to be held in a tight embrace, suddenly the room seemed much colder as the Spartan that had been by her side was abruptly across the room.

"What?" Kelly asked, annoyance infiltrating her fear as the spell of the moment before was broken. The pair was in her room again, and had been just sitting together, talking. Kelly had just felt so content and warm and complete with John, she hadn't been able to help saying the words. It wasn't as if she hadn't already realized that they were true. "What?" she repeated as John began pacing.

He shook his head. "No," he said feverishly, running his hand through his hair as Kelly had seen him do so often when he tried to think under pressure. "Kelly, we can'tâ€"you can't-," John struggled to get the words out. "You can't be inâ€"in _love_ with me. You just can't. No."

Kelly's good mood, which had been growing darker ever since John had pulled away, abruptly vanished. "I can't be in love with you?" she asked softly, hurt seeping through her. She refused to let the Spartan see it, quickly controlling herself before the automatic tears could begin to gather. "What do you mean?"

John stopped pacing, keeping his back to Kelly. "It's against the rules," he explained quietly.

He wasn't lying, Kelly knew that much. There had to be more to it than that, however. "So that's it?" she questioned, hoping to either catch the Spartan in a lie or get him to tell her the entire truth. "You don't want to break the rules for me? For us? You're afraid to get in trouble?"

"It would set a bad example for my team," John said carefully, still not facing her.

Kelly's next attempt was a direct approach. "John. Come on. We both know there's more to it than that. Why can't you tell me?" she asked, pleading.

"Kelly. We've only known each other for a few months. You can't 'love' me," John stated, finally revealing some more of the truth.

Kelly's eyes widened in disbelief. "_That's_ the problem? That we haven't known each other for longer? And you think that has anything to do with it?" Kelly shook her head, admitting everything from her point of view. If there was something she could say that would change his mind, it was worth saying. If she had already lost him, then it would hurt nothing. Determined to do whatever she could, Kelly held

nothing back. "John, normally I would agree with you. A couple of months is really fast. But this isn't normal, we're not normal. I almost lost you, that last mission you went on. I was so scared when they brought you in and I could see how badly you were hurt. I was panicking, you can ask Linda," Kelly admitted, unable to do anything but whisper as she relived the icy grip of fear. "That's when I realized it. I love you, John. I don't want to lose you." The Spartan's shoulders slumped and Kelly realized she had hit his main reason. "You don't want to lose me?" she guessed.

John hesitated a moment before giving in and finally turning to face Kelly. "No, I don't want to lose you," he said passionately. "Kelly, I thought I was going to die back there. It's not an uncommon occurrence for me. You were in the ops room, you saw what happened on this past mission. My entire company almost died. I could have been there. Maybe I would have been the one whose armor was breached, and I wouldn't even have been able to get into space, or maybe I wouldn't have been able to run fast enough, I don't know. There are always a hundred things that can go wrong for me, so many ways that I could die. I don't want to promise you something when I might not be able to keep it. And what about you?" John asked. He reached out to touch Kelly but thinking better of it and turning away to pace again. "The Covenant knows we can understand their language. If they intercepted that transmission, they know you in particular can understand it. Maybe the next trap set is for you, not us." Kelly hadn't thought of that, but she strongly doubted it. She tried to protest, but John cut her off. "This war is just too dangerous. There are too many questions, too many things that can go wrong. I don't want to go into this knowing that one of us will more than likely be dead within the year. I don't want to lose you, Kelly," he whispered, meeting her eyes. "Maybe after the war, when we can be safe-."

"After the war?" Kelly repeated, unable to keep silent. "You think one of us will be dead in a year, and you want to wait for us to be us until after the war? John, why? I understand that you're scared, but if you lose me, you lose me, rather or not we're actually 'together' or not. Would you be hurt if I died? Today?"

"There's hardly any chance, so it's a moot point-."

"Just answer," Kelly half-ordered, half-pleaded.

John sighed. "Yes, I would," he admitted, "and I know what you're trying to convince me. It would hurt either way, so why not say it." He shook his head. "I won't. I don't want you to get hurt, and it would hurt more-."

"Bullshit," Kelly interrupted indignantly, but John continued over her.

"-and I don't want to do that to you. Besides the war, it's against the rules. I don't want to set a bad example for my team, and I don't want either one of us to get in trouble. We can't. Not now. Especially not now, when neither of us can afford to be distracted." He sighed. "Maybe after the war."

"But the war will last for years, if it ends at all!" Kelly exclaimed. "Even if by some miracle it does end and humanity is still alive, we might be dead! And will the end of a single war change the rules, John? Do you really think that? Will the UNSC suddenly not

need the Spartans and let you all go live your lives in society? Do you even know how to do that, to live normally?" Kelly had the horrible realization that she was being cruel, but she refused to back down. Didn't he see that he was wrong? People called her green, but he was the one that didn't know what he was doing! He had no concept of emotions and how to make a relationship work.

"So you're not going to try to understand my opinions on the matter?" John asked, raising his voice just as Kelly had done.

"No, you're the one that's not understanding!" Kelly practically yelled. "I told you that I love you, and you're telling me to wait through a war, a war of which neither of us will probably live to see the end, and even if by some miracle we do both live, you'll still have reasons to turn me down because of the fucking rules! How can you not see that if we do this your way, we will never be together?"

John looked like he was about to yell back, but he took a deep breath instead. "So you don't want to do this my way?" he asked calmly.

"No," Kelly replied firmly. He was wrong. There was nothing else discuss unless he was going to see things her way. "And you don't want to do this my way?"

The Spartan shook his head. "I take it you won't take a promise then? That someday, when things are better-."

"Things won't ever be better," Kelly coldly cut him off.

John nodded, clearly restraining himself from doing or saying more. "I guess that's it, then," he said. "Goodbye, Kelly."

"I'll see you around," she said distantly as he moved towards the door.

Rather than his usual promise, instead his only response was a vague "Maybe," as the Spartan left the room.

Kelly was able to wait an entire ten seconds after he exited before she began sobbing uncontrollably. It wasn't the first night she had ever cried herself to sleep, but it was the first time it had ever hurt this much.

23. Dress Green

Chapter 23:

Bright and Shiny Green

A quiet growl came from behind John. The volume did nothing to detract from the creature's anger, however. The Spartan didn't turn, recognizing the owner of the sound. "Be polite," he ordered softly.

"No," Kelly-087 protested just loudly enough for John to hear. "I fucking hate these dress uniforms. They're stupid. We're supposed to be out there saving the universe, and they have us trapped here in

these ridiculous outfits because they want to show us off."

John sighed mentally and ignored Kelly. Though he agreed with her, he couldn't let it show. He was the team leader, and as such, he had to set an example for the others. In his opinion, though, it was stupid. The UNSC had gone public with the Spartan program, trying to raise moral after the losses of planets. The Commonwealth had been sent to join with Admiral Cole's fleet, and the Spartans were grounded while they waited for the UNSC Resolute to reach their system. The part of the UNSC that dealt with public affairs had arranged for a benefit dinner to be thrown in the Spartans' honor, and as such, they were all present in their dress uniforms. The hotel that was hosting the event had offered to host the Spartans for free, but the four-star accommodations, so different from what the Spartans were used to, did not sit well with most of the team. They were scattered in little clumps across the huge room, varying degrees of discomfort on their faces. Fred and Will looked the most at ease, calmly chatting with a higher-ranking military officer. John made a mental note that if any of the Spartans had to give a speech, one of them should do it. The two men were good at dealing with people. Linda was at the other end of the spectrum. She stood silently by one of the walls, not even attempting a polite smile as she talked to no one. It must have gone against every one of the ten commandments in her sniper's bible to be forced to be part of the center of attention at a party. Someone started to approach her, and John finally turned to face Kelly-087. "Go save Linda," he suggested, hoping to get Kelly's mind off of her annoyance. Kelly nodded and went over to the other woman. She may not have liked the situation, but she would adapt to it and follow orders, John knew that much. He watched as she smoothly cut into the budding conversation and, charming smile on her face, redirected it, allowing Linda to get by with minimal contribution.

"She's good." John turned to see Grace standing next to him. She looked so different in her dress uniform; they all did. Her clothing was neatly pressed, and her shoes shone brightly. Her short hair was parted and hung straight down rather than being slicked back out of her eyes. She carried no gun, but John could see the faint outline of a knife carried under her uniform.

"Yeah, she is," John agreed. "You're not too bad either." He wasn't lying. Grace looked fairly relaxed, even in the crowd of dressed-up UNSC officials and benefactors.

She shrugged. "You gotta do what you gotta do," she quietly explained. "Isn't that what being a Spartan is all about?"

"I thought it was about doing the impossible," John said, only half joking.

Grace nodded. "That too," she admitted seriously. "Speaking of the impossible, you seem to be healing pretty well."

"Yeah," John agreed. "The med techs think I'll be able to go on the next mission."

"Good," Grace said quickly. "You're a good fighter and a good leader. We need you on the ground with us."

"Fred does a fine job-."

"Oh, yeah, I know, I wasn't saying that he doesn't," Grace clarified quickly, cutting John off before he could finish defending the other Spartan. "He's just... not you. I don't know," she failed to explain, shrugging. "He's just not you." John nodded, and the two stood in a companionable silence before Grace spoke again. "May I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course," John said.

Grace bit her lip, hesitating before she plunged ahead. "It's about Kelly, our Kelly. I know she's your best friend and all, but really John? She doesn't have whatever that magic skill is that makes a leader. That mission where you got hurt, her best move was to put Fred in charge. I mean no offense to Kelly, but I think you see the same things I do. Just cut out the middleman and make Fred your second, please."

John grinned slightly. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he agreed. "I realized I should probably do that after the last mission. I just..." At that moment, Kelly-his Kelly-walked into the room, and John's gaze was instantly drawn to her. His sentence trailed off, and he couldn't help staring. She casually avoided looking at John, surveying the entire room except him. His chest began aching again, especially upon seeing how happy she looked. There was a bright smile on her face as she chatted with the male ONI agent with whom she walked. John felt a pang of something that had to be jealousy; he'd never felt it before, but there wasn't anything else it could be. He should be the one walking with her and making her smile, not some random spook.

Grace snapped her fingers, and the spell that Kelly had cast over John was broken. He turned to face the other Spartan, ignoring Kelly as surely as she was ignoring him. "You okay?" Grace asked softly.

John nodded, forcing a smile. "Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?" he asked lightly.

Grace didn't buy it, just looking at him thoughtfully. John tried to hold her gaze, but Kelly's laugh rang out and he involuntarily glanced in her direction, pained look crossing his face. Understanding dawned on Grace's face, and her expression echoed John's. "Something happened," she murmured. "With Kelly. We all call her your Kelly, but she's not anymore, is she?" John remained silent, only able to control himself by neither speaking nor moving. His polite smile was frozen on his face in an attempt to mask what he was feeling. "Do you want to talk about it?" Grace asked softly.

John considered it. "Not here," he said finally.

"So do you want to get out of here?" she suggested. "Everyone is still arriving, so it will be a while before they notice we're gone. I can tell Fred or Kelly that you aren't feeling good, they can cover for us..."

"I'm a Spartan," John pointed out, trying to find the same holes in Grace's logic that someone else would. "I don't get sick."

"Your devastating injuries from one of our recent missions caught up

with you, and you found you simply couldn't stay. I came with you because I was with you when you nearly collapsed and realized you needed someone to take care of you. Fred can give your speech, and no one else will even notice that two Spartans are missing. Done," Grace finished elaborated her cover story.

John hesitated before nodding. "Okay," he agreed.

"Look unwell," Grace ordered. "Go stand and lean on the wall over there. I'll go tell Fred what's going on."

"Who's the leader of this unit?" John teased before obeying. He stood against the wall as if he needed the help standing, surveying the crowd. There were a lot of people there, mostly rich civilians John had never met. There were a decent amount of ONI agents present, but the number of decorated UNSC officers was surprisingly low. Or rather, worrisomely low. The lack of high rank in the room meant that they were needed for more important things. Humanity must be doing worse in the fight against the Covenant than John had thought. His eyes were drawn to Kelly, and suddenly, his unwell expression was not an act. She looked so happy, still talking and laughing with the same ONI agent as she had been before.

The doors to another room swung open, and the smell of food wafted into the room. The spook Kelly was standing with offered his arm to her. Before they left together, she glanced back. John felt eyes on him but deliberately avoided her gaze. Instead, he focused on Grace, who was quickly talking to Fred. After a few seconds, she broke away and made a beeline for John. "Come on," she said calmly, wrapping one arm around John's waist as if he needed help standing. His surgically-enhanced ears picked up the sound of Kelly excusing herself from her "date" and then speaking to someone else.

"Is he alright?" she asked softly.

Walking away, John had to strain to hear the reply. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but that's need-to-know," Fred said.

Grace snorted softly, obviously hearing the same thing John had. "Oh, Fred," she murmured, shaking her head. As soon as they were far enough away from the party, Grace released John. "Follow me," she suggested.

John obeyed, and Grace led him through a maze of luxuriously decorated hallways to the hotel's pool. The room was large and warm, an atmosphere John somehow found comforting. The pool itself was divided into a series of connected grottos, and Grace made her way over to one. She took off her dress uniform-the Spartans were used to communal locker rooms and showers-and neatly folded it up before diving into the clear water. Her head broke the surface a moment later, and the female Spartan shook the water droplets out of her hair. "So," she asked again, "do you want to talk about it?"

John sat and began to unlace his dress shoes, needing something to focus on. "I guess I probably should," he hedged, avoiding Grace's gaze.

He saw motion out of the corner of his eyes as she shrugged. "Yeah, probably. I mean, I'm not really that nosey, I don't need to know or even particularly want to know all of your secrets. It might just

help you calm down to talk it out to someone rather than keeping it all shut up inside," she suggested. "If you don't want to, though, I understand."

"No, you don't." The words were out of John's mouth before he could stop them, and once he started talking, he had to keep going. "You _don't_ understand. Have you ever had someone tell you they love you, only to turn their back on you five minutes later? No, you haven't, and you probably never will as long as you're a Spartan. So don't pretend to understand, because you don't. It's like losing a friend in the field. God, do you know how many people told me they 'understood' how I felt after Sam's death?" John shook his head. "Bull. Every friend is different, every relationship is different, so no one can 'understand' what someone else is going through. Don't tell me you understand, Grace, because you don't. Not one fucking bit."

Where another Spartan would have lost their temper and yelled back at John, Grace just patiently treaded water. "Okay, I don't understand," she agreed calmly. "Two things, though. One, you don't know that I never will. How do you know I won't leave our unit? Look at Maria. She fell in love, and they're talking about both resigning so they can get married. You don't know it'll never happen to me. Although, I hope the turning their back part doesn't have to occur. That's my second thing. She really did that?" Grace asked softly, propping her arms on the side of the pool.

John stripped down to his undergarments, focusing on the task before sitting by Grace and dangling his feet in the water. "Yeah," he replied heavily. "She did."

"Why?" Grace asked.

"She told me she loved me," John said simply. "And I told her not to say it, that we couldn't." He sighed. "You probably didn't hear Kelly-our Kelly-and Linda's channel on that last mission. I was monitoring all of them in Ops, so I did. Linda said something that really hit me. We're Spartans. We don't live happily ever after, or at least, not until after the end of the war. I don't want... my Kelly," he hesitantly clarified, "to think that, to imagine that there's some way we could ever have that. I don't want her to get hurt... Now I guess I don't have to worry about it," he said bitterly.

Grace remained silent for a moment, clearly trying to think of the right thing to say. John stared at the ripples in the water, not really thinking as he tried to calm down. "So she didn't want to wait until after the war, and you, of course, refused to do anything but."

Surprised, John met Grace's thoughtful gaze. "Of course?" he asked, wanting clarification.

Grace nodded. "That's just how you are, that's the John we all know and love. You put duty before everything else, and you have a good heart. You wouldn't allow yourself to get distracted from your work, and like you said, you wouldn't want to hurt her by not coming home and being away so often. So of course, you wouldn't want to do anything but wait until after the war." She hesitated, and John remained silent, waiting for her to continue. "Maybe you should at

least think about it, though."

"Think about it?" he asked in surprise, anger mixing with his pain. He abruptly stood and began pacing. "You want me to think about it? Grace, she fucking let me walk out because I wouldn't do what she wanted. How can she not see that I'm right? She's so stubborn, so determined that she's right, she won't even listen to anything else! I tried to explain, but she wouldn't hear it-."

"John, calm down," Grace interrupted softly. "Think about what you're saying and compare it to what you're doing." The Spartan obeyed, dropping to sit on the edge of the pool again. Grace was right, he grudgingly admitted to himself. He was being hypocritical. "I bet I can guess what her argument was, too. She was afraid you were going to get hurt, and if you die in war-."

"When," John muttered bitterly.

"-it'll hurt whether or not the two of you are actually together. It is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all," Grace continued. "And don't interrupt, especially not to say that. John, you're hurt, you're upset, and you're probably frustrated from not being able to go on the last couple missions. Please, just try to calm down. Don't bite my head off." John took a deep breath, trying to listen to her. "Is that what she said?" Grace asked gently.

"Yes," John admitted after a pause. "How did you know?"

Grace shrugged. "It's not hard to figure out. I'd probably react the same way she did if I was told that."

"So you're siding with her?"

"It's not about taking sides," Grace explained with a sigh. "It's about understanding someone's point of view. I understand where you're coming from, and I understand where Kelly is too. I'm just saying... think about it. I like Kelly, and I'd prefer it if you two weren't cold-shouldering each other."

"Good luck," John murmured. "She let me walk away, and you saw her with that spook tonight. Maybe she doesn't even care anymore."

Grace shook her head. "You heard her as we walked out. She wanted to know if you were okay. She still cares. Trust me."

John nodded. "I'll think about it," he agreed quietly before lapsing back into silence.

The female Spartan allowed him to brood for almost a minute before she smiled and tugged at one of his feet in the water. "Come on. Enough thinking," she ordered. "Just forget about it for now. Quit worrying and swim with me. It'll be okay."

"Will it?" John asked seriously.

The playful grin vanished from Grace's face. "Yes," she reassured him softly. "It will all be okay. I can promise you that."

John nodded, and as he slid into the water, he could almost believe

her.

24. Green Grass

Chapter 24:

The Other Side's Green Grass

Lieutenant Kelly Martin was woken up by a pounding on the door. Groaning, she rolled over, burying her face in her pillow. Life sucked less when she was unconscious. "Kelly, wake up!" Lisa's voice came from outside the room.

"Go away," Kelly mumbled as loudly as she could.

"Kelly, wake the fuck up, I have news for you!" Lisa yelled louder.

Kelly moaned before literally rolling out of bed. The motion was less than graceful, and she almost fell over before grabbing onto door handle. The door was barely unlocked before Lisa pushed it open the rest of the way, shoving into the room. She quickly closed and locked it before glancing around the room. "Good, you're alone," she said, sitting down on Kelly's bed and flipping on one of the lights.

"Who would I possibly be with this early?" Kelly groaned, flopping down on the bed and covering her eyes.

"Well, there was that guy from last night-," Lisa started suggestively, but Kelly cut her friend off.

"Oh, god, don't remind me. You know me well enough now, you know I wouldn't actually-."

"Oh, definitely not, at least, not with him," Lisa clarified. "I just wasn't sure how far you'd go to make John jealous."

Kelly considered fighting the urge to curl up into a ball, but gave up. "You know about that?" she asked, gazing sadly up at Lisa.

The other woman fixed Kelly with a look. "You're seriously asking that?" Kelly moaned and hid her eyes again. Lisa pried her hand away and pushed her towards the edge of the bed. "Come on, get up. Go get dressed, you have stuff to do."

"And you don't?" Kelly complained.

Lisa shook her head. "I don't have new orders from Command."

Kelly froze, suddenly wide awake. "I guess I'm getting up," she decided, gaining the motivation to slide out of bed. "Explain please?"

Lisa complied as Kelly searched for clothes and quickly dressed. "New orders came from Command for you," she said. "Weird ones too. You were told to report back to your desk job. Your field work is done."

Kelly felt intense relief before she thought of everything that had

happened since she had been assigned to the Spartans. But she got to, no, had to leave. But she wanted to, didn't she? But what about John? "And what's so weird about that?" she asked neutrally, silencing her internal argument as she quickly brushed her hair back into a short ponytail. At least if she was given orders, she didn't have to go through the trial of choosing what to do.

"Because those weren't the only orders you were sent," Lisa explained. "You were given two sets of orders, one to report back to your desk and the other to stay with the Spartans. For the first time in, well, ever, Command is giving someone a choice."

Kelly's face fell and she moaned, flopping face down on the bed. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Why me. Why the hell me..."

Lisa shrugged, finally giving her friend sympathy. "I don't know. The workings of Command are a mystery to all of us lowly ground pounders. Everyone that knows has accepted the fact that it has something to do with your relationship with Spartan 117, but no one knows exactly why your fight affected this. There's even a bet going on as to what you'll do."

Kelly rolled over to face Lisa. "How long ago did these orders come in?"

Lisa laughed shortly. "Two hours. You gotta love how quickly word spreads." Kelly hesitated for a moment, not sure how to react. Her pent-up emotions got the better of her, and she turned, screaming into the pillow. Lisa touched her shoulder, trying to calm her friend. "Hey. It's okay..."

"No, its not," Kelly said hoarsely, turning her face away from the pillow so she could breathe.

"Crap, Kelly, don't cry," Lisa murmured, attempting to sound comforting. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Kelly refused to allow herself to cry, taking a shaky breath before telling Lisa everything. To her friend's credit, she remained silent, allowing Kelly to finish before passing judgement. "What an ass," were the first words out of Lisa's mouth.

"You mean John?" Kelly asked, confused.

Lisa nodded. "Who else would I call an ass? That was a particularly asinine move on his part, so I called him out on it. What an ass."

"He's not an ass," Kelly protested, still confused. This time, however, it was by her tangle of emotions rather than Lisa's words. She agreed with Lisa, didn't she? So why was she defending John? The more objective part of her knew why, but she refused to think the words.

"Oh yeah? Well then why did he refuse to shoot you down, tell you that you guys couldn't be together until after the war?"

"He just doesn't want either of us to get hurt," Kelly continued defending John.

"But you're going to get hurt anyway."

"He doesn't want it to hurt more than it has to."

"And that's ass-like move," Lisa shot back, continuing quickly before Kelly could really process what the other woman had said. "And besides, you're totally right, it'll still be against the rules after the war."

"But it was against the rules before and we had something before, so he was breaking them then..."

"Whatever. To top it all off, he completely refused to hear your point of view. He wouldn't even try to understand you."

"But I didn't either," Kelly said, the realization coming to her as it was the only way to continue defending John from Lisa's harsh words. True, John hadn't tried to see her side, but she hadn't seen his either. They had both been so stubborn... Everything she had said in John's defense was true. Maybe she should just try to see things from his point of view...

Lisa smiled, standing up. "Good," she said proudly. "My work here is done."

She headed towards the door and Kelly frowned in confusion again. "What?"

"You needed someone to get you to quit focusing on what was so wrong with what he said and get you to focus on what's right," Lisa explained. "I merely aided your realization." She flashed Kelly a bright grin again before pulling open the door. "Think about it again. If you need me, you know my room number. Don't forget your orders from Command!" she called before letting the door swing shut.

Kelly sat in silence for a moment before moaning, her exhaustion catching up with her. Lisa had given her more food for the thought, but it was too early, and chewing sounded too difficult. She let herself lay there for a minute longer before sighing and fixing her messed-up ponytail. There were things to do now, and there would be plenty of time to figure out how she felt about John later.

25. Ghostly Green

Chapter 25:

Ghostly Green

"Give him up."

Kelly-087 yawned and stretched, cat-like, on the carpeted floor. "You could have woken me up," she complained lazily, turning to face Linda.

The other woman shrugged, not looking up from where she had a sniper rifle disassembled on the desk in front of her. "Everyone's breathing is different when they're asleep. I knew you were awake. Did you have a nice nap?"

Kelly knew Linda didn't actually care about what she said, so she answered sweetly anyway. "Very nice, thank you for asking. My bed was too soft last night. The floor is much more comfortable."

Linda snorted. "Yeah, okay. Seriously though, Kelly, I want to talk to you."

Kelly raised her eyebrows. "You want to talk? To me? But you never want to talk, especially not to me. I was under the impression you avoided that as much as you could."

"Kelly, I'm serious."

At her tone of voice, Kelly leaned forward before somersaulting back and into a crouch. From there, she stood and crossed the fancy hotel room the two women were being forced to share. "Okay, shoot," she said, relaxing on the bed next to the desk where Linda was working. "And by the way, haven't you checked over that same rifle about twenty times by now?"

"Yes. I have nothing else to do," Linda grumbled. "I hate down time just as much as you. But seriously, Kelly. I know you heard what I said earlier. Give him up."

"Give who up?" Kelly started to ask innocently, but the other Spartan cut her off.

"I'm not stupid, I know you like John," came the dry reply. "You should give him up."

Where before Kelly's attitude had been joking, her words began to turn defensive. "Why?" she asked, crossing her arms defiantly.

Linda sighed. "He's in love with Kelly, and that Kelly isn't you."

"But they fought. They're not together anymore-."

"Were they ever really 'together'?" Linda asked rhetorically. "No. So nothing is really different."

"But they aren't even talking anymore-," Kelly protested.

"And do you think that changes anything? You saw John leave last night with Grace, do you really think he felt bad enough to leave because of his injuries?" Linda shook her head. "You know him better than that. He misses her. It's obvious he still loves her."

"But she doesn't love him," Kelly argued back. "Speaking of last night, you saw her with that ONI spook. If she still loves John, what the hell's she doing screwing around with some other guy so soon?"

Linda sighted down the detachable scope on her rifle, making minute adjustments as she answered. "Do you not understand humans at all?"

she asked distractedly. "She was trying to make him jealous, obviously."

"Obviously," Kelly echoed, mocking her sometimes-friend.

"And it worked," Linda continued, ignoring the annoying woman. "So Kelly. You need to give him up. This is one fight you can't win."

"Oh yeah?" Linda's words came across as a challenge and Kelly readily accepted it.

The sniper put down her rifle and turned to face the other Spartan, giving her full attention for the first time. "Yeah. You can't win this fight, and if you keep trying, you'll just hurt friends. Your stunt a few weeks ago, getting drunk with John?" Kelly's cheeks flamed in embarrassment, but she kept glaring steadily at Linda. "Yeah, exactly. That didn't turn out so well. So quit trying. Don't push something that isn't going to happen, because it's just going to tear our team apart, and then we all die in battle and it doesn't matter anyway. And Kelly?" Linda continued softly. "If you really care about John, don't you want him to be happy?"

Kelly sighed, torn and hurt. "It's not that easy," she murmured. "And he's already distancing himself from me. He demoted me this morning, I'm not his second anymore. Maybe I already screwed the team up."

Linda grinned. "No, Rabbit, that's just common sense. You're not a leader and you know it."

"Yeah," Kelly couldn't help but agree, smiling slightly. She didn't want to admit it, but blunt or not, everything Linda had said made sense. "I guess I'll try," she agreed reluctantly.

"Good." Linda turned back to her sniper rifle and Kelly moved towards the window, lost in thought. The dreary rain outside matched her mood, and she stared into grey mist. Movement caught her eyes, and several things happened in quick succession. Kelly identified the waddling motion of a Grunt, and recognized that it held something outstretched in its hand—a plasma pistol? A grenade? There wasn't time to look again. She grabbed her pistol off of the bedside table, fluidly aiming at the creature before she glimpsed more movement. A woman ran into the rain towards the thing—a child, carrying its toy. Icy fear rendered Kelly immobile at what she had almost done, and a shot went off from one of the upper floors at almost the same time as a loud thud.

Linda was almost immediately at the window, her battle-gaze in place. She stared out the window, ignoring the mother and child as she scanned the surrounding area for the Covenant forces Kelly and someone else had obviously seen. Kelly suddenly felt weak, dropping heavily to sit on the bed. Linda glanced back at her before looking out the window again. Only after a second look did she notice the humans. "Oh my God," she breathed, eyes widening. "Kelly, you didn't-?"

Kelly nodded numbly. "They didn't get hit, did they?"

Linda slowly shook her head as she watched. "No," she said finally.

"Kelly, what happened?"

"The kid. He moved like a Grunt. His toy, I couldn't see it, I thought it was a weapon," Kelly murmured in shock. "Somebody upstairs did too, but they actually shot..."

"And were thrown off balance so the shot went wild," Linda surmised, the same blank expression on her face as when the Spartans were forced to witness some horrible carnage. "Oh my god..."

Kelly set her pistol aside, the weapon suddenly feeling wrong in her grasp. Her worries of just minutes before suddenly seemed petty and pointless. "I could have killed a civilian," she whispered, her cheeks that had been red with embarrassment before now a ghostly pale. "A kid."

Linda sat near her, hesitantly putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "But you didn't, and that's what's important."

"What about next time?" Kelly asked, needing to hear the truth. "What happens next time, when there's no second glance or no one to throw off the shot?"

There was silence as Linda struggled to find something to say. "Then we kill civilians. Kids," she admitted finally.

Kelly nodded. "We're killers," she agreed darkly.

"Remember what I said about happily ever after?" Linda questioned, standing and moving back to her rifle. "Even if we live to see the end of war, this one and any others, how many civilians are we going to kill before we look twice?" She shook her head. "There isn't any happily ever after for us. There never will be."

Kelly nodded again, numb. Needing something to do, she went to the door. "I'm going for a run."

Linda glanced towards the rain-spattered window, but said nothing other than a simple word of affirmation. Kelly thought best when her feet were moving, and she had plenty to think about. Fat raindrops landed on Kelly's short hair as soon as she stepped outside, and as her feet pounded the pavement, words and phrases kept cycling through her head. _Killer. No happily ever after. Killer. Murder of civilians. Killer. Child slayer_. The words haunted her, almost chasing her down the wet streets. As big as Kelly's problems seemed though, John somehow snuck into her thoughts as he so often did. She knew she had to move on, to 'give him up' as Linda had said, but for the moment, she couldn't. In the dark and cold situation, just his name made her feel better. As long as John was there, the Spartans had hope. She didn't have to worry about the future because even then, she wouldn't have to anything to fear. John would make sure they were in good hands, as he always had and always would. John would make it all okay. Warmed by that thought, Kelly kept running in the cold rain as her feet took her back towards her team.

Green Machine

The Spartans were ready to move out. Finally. Although they had been ready for days, the ship they were waiting for had taken its sweet time arriving, and even then, the crew had been given a couple days' leave. Everything was finally ready, though, and there were Pelicans waiting at a nearby airport to take the Spartans to the ship. From there they would be touring various planets, trying to keep the Covenant infestations at bay for at least a long enough time to evacuate civilians and get rid of any information that could lead the Covenant to Earth. The Cole Protocol with its safety measures had been put into effect, and the Spartans were its enforcers. The Covenant wouldn't be finding Earth on their watch.

They were all battle ready, encased in their MJOLNIR. The rain fell steadily, making cases of weapons and replacement parts slick with water. The Spartans were in good spirits in spite of the weather, joking and teasing as they loaded the troop transports that would take them to the airport. They were grateful to finally be leaving the planet they had been stuck on and getting back into action. The rain, though it tried, did nothing to dampen their spirits.

John was the exception to both rules. He was in his fatigues rather than MJOLNIR as he had been ordered by the med techs to stay out of the next battle. He wasn't as glad as the others about their departure, either. There was a myriad of reasons, but he couldn't deny that his reluctance was centered on Kelly. Lieutenant Kelly Martin, to whom the choice had been given to go back to her previous job or leave with the Spartans. After their fight, it was fairly clear what she would decide on. John had thought about what they'd said to each other over and over again, just as he'd told Grace he would. He wanted to say something, anything, to Kelly, but he didn't know what. He couldn't find the right words to convey what he meant. Every time he came even close to approaching her, he began to feel nervous and stumbled over his words. John had tried writing a note to her, hoping what he wanted to say would come through more easily that way, but that hadn't worked either. So there he was, about to leave. Kelly was the only woman he had ever cared about in that wayâ€| and he was going to leave her because he hadn't been able to think of something to say.

Of course, John wasn't the only one who had passed up his chance to say something. Kelly had never approached him, and if she truly did care, as Grace said she did, she probably would have. Maybe she didn't love him as much she'd said. Or maybe she just hadn't been able to find the right words either. They had only seen each other a couple of times over their days on the planet. John had caught Kelly watching him, but it would have been a lie to say he hadn't watched her too. She didn't seem as happy as she usually didâ€| though if that was his fault or due to something else, John didn't know.

No matter what Kelly felt, John still cared about her. He wished he done something. He didn't want to let whatever slim chance they may have slip through his fingersâ€| but it was too late. His chance to say something to Kelly had already come and gone. The Spartans were done loading equipment and piling into the transports. John looked back up at the hotel, squinting through the rain in the hope that he might glimpse her familiar face. As fateâ€|or luckâ€|would have it, from the third floor, a woman looked solemnly out over the Spartans. Kelly. John's heart ached, and he was helpless to do anything but

stare up at her. Their eyes met until Kelly quickly turned away, the window shades sliding shut without her holding them open. The pain in John's chest intensified, and there was a light touch on his shoulder.

"The green machine is ready to roll out, sir," Kelly-087 said playfully, rain dripping off her armor. "Hey, are you okay?" she asked, tone of voice changing as she noticed John's expression.

He nodded, pulling himself together. "Good," he said in response to her first statement, sounding stronger than he felt. "Let's get going, then."

The female Spartan nodded, getting into the transport as John walked around to the passenger's side. He climbed in slowly, in no hurry to leave. As he slammed the door shut with a final-sounding thud, he glanced back for one final look at the hotel. The window where Kelly had been remained covered. John tried to ignore his pain as he started the transport's engine, wondering if he would ever see her again.

27. Lovely Green

Chapter 27:

Love-ly Green

Lieutenant Kelly Martin sprinted down the long hallway. The distance from her room to the stairs was entirely too long, at least, too long in this case. Three stories was too far to jump from her window though, and that was the only way she would get where she was going fast enough. Words and feelings meant nothing if she was dead and couldn't explain them. She had to get to John before he left. She had to. Her mind was too scared to accept any alternative.

Kelly nearly tripped twice as she flew down the stairs, and only barely managed to catch herself on the hand rail. Finally, the plush lobby was in front of her, the great glass doors revealing the rain-drenched parking lot. A series of transports sat outside, and there was a muted rumble as their engines started. Kelly pushed herself faster, shoving through anyone in her way. The doors slid open under her touch, and she was instantly soaked by the torrential rain.

"John!" she yelled in vain, knowing he couldn't hear her. One of the trucks' reverse lights came on, then flickered off as one of the doors opened. A figure stepped out, one not wearing armor like the other Spartans. _John_.

Kelly ran towards him, and he reached her in a second, strong arms wrapping around her tightly. "I'm so sorry," Kelly cried, hot tears mixing with the cold rain on her face. "John, I'm so sorry."

He shook his head, pulling away from her to cup her face in his hands. "No, I'm sorry," John said seriously, meeting Kelly's eyes in the most emotion-filled gaze she had ever seen from him. "Kelly, I-."

Kelly shook her head, wrapping her arms around John again as she laid

her head on his chest. "No," she protested. "I shouldn't have been like that. I didn't even try to understand you, I just refused to even listen to you. John," she murmured, looking up at him, "you are more important to me than anything, anyone else. If you want to wait until after the war, then we will. I'm so sorry," she repeated in a whisper.

"No, I'm the one that wasn't listening," John argued, trying to defend her. "You're right, if either one of us gets killed, it won't matter if we are or aren't together, it'll still hurt. At least if we're together, we'll have had some time to spend with each other. Kelly," John whispered, hugging her tightly. "I'm so very sorry. ...I love you," he said, so softly that Kelly almost missed it. "I don't really know how to do this, I mean, I never have before, but will you, I mean, will you be my, uh-."

Kelly interrupted John's scramble for words. "No," she said firmly.

"No?"

"No," Kelly repeated. "That's what this whole fight was about, remember? Let's not do this again, please. Don't you see?" she asked fervently. "It doesn't matter. If we're together, if we're not together, whatever. All that matters is that we both know how we feel. So let's not say it. Let's just... Wing it."

John hesitated, then nodded. "Okay," he agreed. "Okay. As long as you know how I feel." Kelly nodded too, head rubbing against John's wet shirt. "I was so scared I was going to lose you. And now I still will," he continued, sounding upset. "I'm leaving, my whole team is moving out, I'm sure you heard that, and you're going back to your job-."

John stopped as Kelly frantically shook her head. "No, no, no," she said quickly. "I'm not going back to that. You're not leaving without me."

"But your family... You'd be safer back on Reach..."

"No," Kelly stated. "I'm going with you."

"Your belongings-."

"Are already packed, as they have been for the past few days when I've been trying to decide what to do," she interrupted.

John couldn't help laughing, sounding overjoyed. "Okay, okay," he agreed. "You're coming with us."

Kelly grinned widely, even though John couldn't see it. "I love you," she whispered into his chest.

"I love you," John told her, fiercely hugging her.

Kelly turned her face up towards his, ignoring the rain that pounded her face. John leaned down towards her, and for the first time, their lips met. The rest of the world seemed to vanish as John gently kissed her, holding her like she was the most important being in the world. Kelly felt like she was floating. The rain, the cold, the

other Spartans that were probably watching... Nothing else mattered. In just that moment, everything was perfect

They parted after what felt like an eternity and yet no time at all, smiles spreading across both of their faces. Then one of the transports honked, and the moment was broken. "I need to go get my bag," Kelly said quickly, turning back towards the hotel.

John nodded. "I'll come help you, just let me go tell the drivers to wait a few more minutes."

Kelly flashed John a smile before heading back through the pounding rain. A thought occurred to her, and she spun around. "John," she called. He turned towards her, taking an almost automatic step in her direction. "Did you hear me call out to you earlier?"

John frowned, confused. "You called my name?"

"When I ran out here," she explained. "I thought you heard me, and that's why you got out of the transport."

The Spartan shook his head, smiling. "No," he said softly, approaching Kelly again. "I just couldn't leave without at least trying to making things right between us."

Kelly's grin saddened. "I'm sorry we fought," she murmured.

"I'm sorry too," John agreed. "But hey. Cheer up. It's all okay now."

Kelly nodded, feeling her smile come back in full force. Before John could turn back to the transports, she quickly stood on tiptoe to kiss him once more. "I know," she agreed, warm despite the cold rain. "Now go tell the drivers you have one more passenger. I'll go get my bags, I'll only be a minute or two."

John grinned at her and started back towards the vehicles. Kelly turned back towards the hotel, jogging through the rain. Her fear of only minutes before seemed long gone, her heartbreak left in the past. Everything was at peace between John and herself. Their mistakes were behind them, and together they were going to move into the future.

28. Hunter Green

Chapter 28:

Hunter Green

Dr. Catherine Halsey ignored the mess of papers on her desk, recklessly setting her half-empty coffee cup down on a stack. Her focus was instead on the laptop in front of her. Readouts from one of her projects scrolled across the screen, and the scientist muttered under her breath as she fought to work out a way to solve the problem. There was a flash of blue light, and an AI appeared on its pad, the one part of the desk not buried in papers. "What is it, Kalmiya?" Halsey asked tiredly, automatically reaching for her coffee again.

The AI smiled secretively. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, Doctor, but I have news you'll find interesting."

Halsey arched one eyebrow as she sipped the luke-warm drink. "And what would that be?" she asked finally.

"You have an update from one Lieutenant Commander Lisa Blackwood," was all Kalmiya said. "I daresay you'll find it worth the distraction."

"Oh, alright," the scientist agreed, minimizing the program on her laptop and pulling up her electronic mailing system. The security on the program was atrocious, but Halsey had added few measures of her own to keep out intruders, and it was better than waiting weeks for paper, Eyes-Only copies to arrive. There was indeed a letter from the Spartans' attachÃ©, a rather short one considering that most had the Spartans' full test results, current injury list, and ground orders (when not classified) attached.

Dr. Halsey, Lisa wrote,

You asked me to tell you when/if there was any new development in the relationship between Spartan-117 and Lieutenant Martin. As such, it is my duty to inform you that the two have not only resolved their differences after the fight I previously told you about, they have reached an agreement that is, in and of itself, no agreement at all. They are merely doing whatever seems right, and both are determined that while this will not get in the way of their duty. They have said the words, and now act like a couple when they think no one is watching (or even when someone is, and they just don't care). It isn't an act, either, Doctor. I spend enough time with Kelly to know that she really cares about him. She's told me in so many words. The emotion isn't just on her end, however. Spartan-117 truly loves her. He doesn't have anyone he confides in that I could talk to and get confirmation from, but it's obvious in the way he looks at her. He seems so happy when they're together. Kelly makes him smile, and that's something none of the Spartans do very often. They worked through one fairly major argument, so my bet is that they're going to make this work. This isn't over yet, and I doubt it will be, at least, not for a fairly long while.

On a more personal note, ma'am, I would like to convey the discomfort that I feel upon reporting the intimate feelings of one of my closest friends. I will continue to do my duty as her relationship is with Spartan-117, but I cannot help feeling uncomfortable about it. If there is ever no longer a need for these reports on their relationship, I will be only too glad to switch to another assignment. I will continue to do my duty until that time arises, however.

I hope this letter finds you well and that you find this information useful for whatever project for which it is being used.

-Lieutenant Commander Lisa Blackwood

Dr. Halsey looked over at Kalmiya, not entirely surprised by what the Lieutenant Commander had reported. "You knew."

The AI shrugged. "I can't help that I get bored so very easily. You have so many delicious files to get into."

"There are other files that you could spend even more time trying to break into," Halsey murmured noncommittally, glancing back at her laptop. "Well, I guess there's only one thing to do now."

Kalmiya laughed brightly. "Ackerson will certainly be pleased to hear that he won your bet. And you didn't think the pairing would work," she continued, playfully chastising the woman who had effectively created her. "Shows what faith you have in AI-made calculations."

"My faith was not placed in Beowulf's calculations, but rather in the complexities of human emotions and the inability of an AI to completely account for them," Halsey replied, only half-focusing as she began to type, a scowl fixed on her face. "Damn. What is there to compliment about this man?"

"That's what you get for losing a bet. He's probably the only person for whom you've ever written a letter of recommendation, isn't he?"

The scowl deepened. "You very well know the answer to that."

"What an honor," Kalmiya teased before disappearing, leaving Dr. Halsey to think in silence.

Far across the universe, the same scenario was repeated. "It worked," Beowulf said abruptly, appearing on his master's desk. Unlike Halsey's office, this room was organized and immaculately clean.

Ackerson looked up from the paper he was reading. "What worked?"

Beowulf clasped his hands together before pulling them apart, revealing a rapidly growing document between his holographic hands. "The Spartan-II experiment," he explained. "Halsey just received a report from her personal informer."

Attention caught, the man leaned closer, rapidly reading the report. "Lieutenant Commander Lisa Blackwood," he mused slowly, leaning back in his chair once he had finished reading. "Can we trust her judgement?"

"Yes," Beowulf confirmed, bright calculations streaming behind his hologram's dark eyes. "Lieutenant Commander Blackwood is trustworthy, as well. She started at the bottom and worked her way to the top rather than starting on top because of her skills, such as Spartan-117's romantic interest."

"What did you think of her?" Ackerson asked, mildly curious.

"Lieutenant Kelly Martin?" Beowulf clarified. "I found her to be brilliant, for a human. She's obsolete compared to Artificial Intelligences though. She's a very emotional woman. She quickly became annoyed by me and was very rude at times. It doesn't seem like she and the stoic Spartan-117 would be an ideal match. My calculations about the two of them were correct, however," he said, sounding almost smug.

"And we can trust that Lieutenant Commander Blackwood wouldn't lie to Halsey?"

"The LC is willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top, or at least, to a certain point. As you can see, she's starting to show qualms about the work Halsey is asking her to do."

Ackerson nodded thoughtfully. "We need to work quickly then, to activate the second phase of the plan before she stops sending reports to Halsey. Is the dear Doctor planning on sharing this information with me, by the way?"

"She's composing the letter right now," the AI replied. "Unfortunately, I can't tell you any more than that; her vexatious AI blocked me."

"That's alright. We already have all the information we need from her," Ackerson murmured, deep in thought. There was silence in the office for a moment before his gaze snapped back from nothing and to the AI. "Find out where the Spartans are going next. We're going to need as detailed of information as we can get if we're going to do this right."

The AI nodded and vanished. Ackerson sighed deeply, pulling a paper out of one of his drawers. The sketch on it was a rough battle plan; rather than troops, however, Grunts and Elites were drawn in miniature proportions. Arrows were drawn indicating their movements. A standard flanking procedure was detailed, with two separate groups driving the lone human into a place where she would be surrounded by others. The prey to the Covenant's hunters. For a moment, Ackerson felt a twinge of something where his heart had been before he had effectively sold his soul in failed attempts to win the war: guilt. He refused to acknowledge it, instead pushing it away. "For the greater good," he muttered before turning to his computer to compose the proper message to be interception.

29. Green Light

A/N: Sorry its been so long since I updated, life has been ridiculously busy lately. We're near the end of the story, though, so unfortunately that means it may have to be just as long before the next update as the last two chapters have to be written then released simultaneously. I'll do my best to get them out before Christmas though. Hope you enjoy the chapter, and happy holidays, all!

Chapter 29:

Green Light

The room was dimly lit, drawing everyone's attention to the holograph-topped table in the center of the room. The Spartans stood clustered around it, the strange light from the holograms reflecting eerily off of their armor. A city made of light rose up from the table, certain parts of it zooming or turning as one Spartan manipulated the display's settings.

"We've been given the green light on our next mission," Fred explained, gesturing towards the array of buildings. "This is the

city of Malpensa on Levosia. The Covenant landed and are wreaking hell on the city trying to turn it into some kind of base. We've received an encrypted message saying that there is unsecured data in Malpensa that could lead the Covenant to Earth. This is a direct violation of the Cole Protocol, and we're being sent to make sure the Covenant doesn't find it."

As Fred talked, John surveyed his team. Once again, he was the only Spartan not in armor. The others were battle-ready. John wished he was going with them. The med techs on the Resolute had checked him over upon embarking, and he was cleared to go back to active duty with his teammates the day after they were to return from this op. John knew they were just being careful and that he should listen to them, but it didn't feel fair that he had to abandon his team once again. Fred would be just fine leading them, but John wanted to go along, even if he wouldn't be in charge. He hated them risking their lives while he sat in safety.

"One thing that hasn't factored into our missions for a while could play a key part in this one," Fred continued. At the edge of the table, Vinh manipulated the controls and the city vanished. Where the buildings had been, a group of battle-hardened humans not in uniform appeared. "Insurrectionists. As I'm sure you know, this was the real birthplace of the Insurrection. There was an established colony of them here before the Covenant landed. With as many precautions as they took to ensure that we never fully eradicated them, it's not too hard to believe that there are still some hiding out in the city. I'm willing to bet that they wouldn't respond kindly to us trying to delete the data that they may need if they ever decide to return to Earth."

Kelly-087 stepped forward. "Sir, do we know for certain that the nav data is in their hands?"

Fred shook his head. "We have our suspicions, but nothing is confirmed yet." He glanced at Vinh and she changed the display to show the city. "Due to transmissions that we've received from an AI remaining in the city, these are the probable locations of the data." Vinh tapped the controls again, and about a dozen red dots popped up in various buildings. "The AI will help us as much as it can, and when we're done, we will have to collect it. That's why we can't use an EMP and knock everything out; the UNSC wants the AI before it falls into either Covenant or Insurrectionist hands. So, to accomplish this, we'll be splitting into two teams. I'll lead Blue team, and Red team..."

Fred hesitated, glancing around the room. His gaze rested on John the longest, but John didn't say anything. This was Fred's decision to make, not his. "John," someone murmured.

"That would be ideal," Fred agreed. He looked like he was going to say more, but Kelly-087 cut him off.

"You're not hurt anymore, they're just being cautious," she scoffed, eyes meeting John's. "Come with us. Please," Kelly continued softly. "We need you."

John looked over at Fred, who shrugged. "We could use your help on this one," he admitted.

John hesitated, deliberating. He was supposed to spend the next couple of days healing, but he felt nearly back to normal... And his team needed him. He made his decisions. The med techs would just have to get over it. "Okay," he agreed, stepping away from the wall to join the circle of armored giants. "I'm in. Fred, this is still your mission though."

Kelly-087 grinned widely, and several other Spartans mirrored her expression. Fred merely nodded. "Good. You'll lead Red team then."

"Understood," John replied. The other Spartan continued detailing the mission, but John found it hard to focus. As soon as he had spoken, he'd gotten the strangest feeling of déjà vu. There was no memory attached to it, just this bad feeling, like something was about to go horribly wrong.

"You okay, Chief?" Isaac asked quietly.

John forced the thoughts away, attention back where it should be. "Yeah, I'm fine." It was just a feeling, and that was Kurt's unofficial job, not John's. He was probably just worrying about his Kelly and what part she would play in the mission. That had to be where the feeling came from. John dismissed it, reminding himself that Kelly would be staying on the ship. No matter what happened, she wasn't coming to the surface of Levosia. Though the mission was important, her safety was what really mattered to John. He couldn't let worrying get in his way, however. The mission had to take priority over his feelings for Kelly. Fred concluded the briefing, and as John went to put on his armor, he tried to quit focusing on Kelly. She would stay on the ship, and he was going down to the planet. If he couldn't focus on the present, he would get himself and his team killed. Kelly was staying on the ship. Comforted by this fact, John managed to stop worrying. Kelly would be safe. She had to be.

He stopped by her room before heading to the Pelican that would take Red team planet-side. The door opened before John had a chance to knock, and Kelly ran into him as she quickly exited the room. "Sor-hey," she said cheerfully, cutting off the automatic apology that she had started. The smile that appeared on her face quickly turned to a look of confusion at his armor, then understanding. "You're going with them, aren't you."

John nodded, unsure how she was going to respond. He didn't want to upset her... But he had to tell her. It was better for her to find out from him than from someone else over coms once he was down on the planet. "Yes."

Kelly didn't protest as he'd been afraid she would. Instead she nodded seriously. "Of course you would be," she murmured, a slight smile alighting on her face.

"The med techs said I'd be good to go soon," the Spartan explained quickly, "and, well, my team needs me..." He trailed off at Kelly's expression.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," she said gently. "I know. I figured you'd be going. I just... Be careful down there, okay?"

John nodded seriously. "I'll do my best," he agreed. "You... be careful too, okay?"

Kelly laughed. "How much trouble can I get into on the ship?" she teased.

"Kelly, I'm serious."

The smile slid off of Kelly's face as she understood. He was just as worried about her as she was about him. He just showed it differently. "I will," she replied softly. An alarm sounded throughout the ship, and John glanced in the direction of the hangar. "You need to go," Kelly said quickly.

John nodded. "Kelly..." he started, glancing uneasily at the crew members running up and down the passageway. He wanted to kiss her, to say something, but there were so many people... Any of them could see or hear...

"I know," Kelly cut in before John could continue, smiling lovingly at him. "I know exactly what you're thinking. Now go, okay? And be careful. I'll see you later."

"Yes," John agreed firmly. "You will." After one final smile at her, he left and turned his thoughts from Kelly. His team was his only concern right now, and John wouldn't let them down.

30. The Green Mile

Sorry it's taken me so long to finish this, life has been hectic and I had to wait to post the last two chapters together. You'll see why. Enjoy :)

Chapter 30:

The Green Mile

Lieutenant Kelly Martin sat near the coms station on the bridge, monitoring the Covenant frequencies the UNSC forces had managed to hack into. There was a steady stream of chatter between the two ships in the area and the forces on the ground. Every time a new squad reported in, Kelly tagged their location on a model of Malpensa that was on her datapad. Slowly the screen began filling up with red dots. The Spartan teams' were marked in yellow, and the locations of the NAV data were a brilliant purple. The Insurrectionists were the only variable unaccounted for.

"..and the demons have infiltrated sector 14." At the mention of the Covenant's name for the Spartans, Kelly began paying more attention. The growling voice was that of an Elite, and the creature continued reporting back to its superior. Sector 14... The problem-or challenge, as Kelly liked to see it-with interpreting the Covenant was that so much of their speech was purely religious references.

"They will no longer profane the name of the gods, but shall be a holy sacrifice to please them," a higher, more melodious voice intoned.

"It will be done," the Elite rasped, and their channel went silent for a second before Kelly's equipment automatically switched to a different frequency.

"One of the data chips has been destroyed," one of the officers on the bridge reported.

Ice-cold fear ran down Kelly's spine. The Spartans. A holy sacrifice? _Holy shit. _The woman quickly manipulated her datapad, focusing on first one, then the other Spartan team. They were both relatively plagued by the Covenant forces, but there was no trap as the communication would suggest. Around their targets, though...

Kelly manipulated the screen, changing the view to check each of the purple dots. She had barely gotten a glimpse of a red mass surrounding one before the live feed broke into a black error screen. At the same moment, her ear piece dissolved into static. Loud voices erupted across the bridge, and Kelly looked up, forced away from her work. "Coms are down, we can't reach them."

"Did anyone have their last position?"

"We're blind, we have nothing!"

"What the hell just happened?"

"Oh my god," Kelly whispered. "Try to get the Chief," she ordered, turning to the man seated at the coms station next to her.

He shook his head, looking panicked. "We have nothing."

Panic gripped Kelly. "Did anyone else see that?" one of the officers asked loudly, standing to get everyone's attention.

Kelly stood as well, fear evident on her face. "I did."

The other woman nodded. "There's a trap waiting for Red team. Permission to go planetside and warn them?"

"Permission denied," the captain replied immediately. "We need you here."

Kelly tried to speak, but her fear choked her and she had to clear her throat before she could try again. "Sir, may I go?"

The man turned and regarded her as though he had never seen her before. "You'll need an escort," was all he said.

Kelly glanced around the bridge and was rewarded when Lisa stood up. "Permission to accompany Lieutenant Martin? Lieutenant Commander O'Mara can take my place."

The captain hesitated. "Granted," he replied finally.

"Thank you, sir," Lisa called behind her as Kelly practically sprinted from the room. "Look, stop blindly running and follow me," she ordered once they were out of sight of the bridge. "Do you even know where you're going?"

"I have to get to the planet," Kelly replied frantically.

Lisa grabbed her, forcing her to stop. "You have got to calm down," she commanded. "Kelly, I'm serious. I know you're scared for him, but you have to calm down. Panicking will not help anything. What do you think Spartan 117 would do in your place? Would he be losing his mind?"

"No," Kelly admitted, trying to calm down. "He'd be strong."

"Yes, he would," Lisa agreed. "Do him proud, okay?"

Kelly nodded, the thought of John giving her strength. "Okay. Now can we go, please?"

Rather than responding, Lisa jogged off towards the hangar. Kelly followed her closely as they pushed through whatever crew members were in their way. They boarded a Longsword in the hangar, and Lisa took over piloting down to the planet. All Kelly could do was hang on and pray. She tried to keep from worrying, but it was extremely difficult. Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, the Longsword settled down between some buildings. Kelly and Lisa dashed down the ramp and into the city.

Distant explosions echoed, but the streets through which the women ran were eerily empty. Kelly began to feel short of breath, but her fear for John kept her going. Something suddenly bounced onto the street in front of them. "Flash bang!" Lisa shrieked, but Kelly didn't have time to close her eyes before it exploded. She couldn't see anything, and her ears rang. She felt hands grabbing her roughly and let out a panicked shriek. Slowly her vision and hearing came back as Kelly struggled to get away. The feeling of something at her throat made her freeze. Blinking away the last of the spots in her vision, she could see Lisa held by three men. Kelly knew at least one was behind her, and several more prowled around them. The leader was clearly identifiable by the swagger and confidence with which he approached Lisa. "Nice ship you've got there," he said conversationally.

"Kelly, don't tell them anything," Lisa ordered quickly. Her voice was higher than normal in her fear, and that fact that she was at least worried about the situation scared Kelly.

"Stop talking," one of the men commanded, glancing uneasily in the direction of the explosions.

"They'll come, they'll come for you and you'll be as dead as you're threatening to make us-."

"He said, stop talking," the man behind Kelly ordered, and she whimpered in fear as the knife was pressed tighter against her throat. She met Lisa's gaze and found a forced calm there. Lisa's fear seemed to disappear as she made herself calm down. Kelly tried to do the same, but it was so difficult... John was going to die, his entire team was unless she escaped...

Lisa blinked several times, eyes widening in between as she tried to convey something to Kelly. Kelly tried to interpret, but silent body language was completely different than most of the languages she studied. Lisa bit her lip before nodding and yelling "Now!" She

twisted and began fighting to get away from her captors, and Kelly struggled to do the same. The lieutenant tried to remember at least the basic self defense she had been taught, but she hadn't practiced for so long...

"Grab them!"

"Don't let them get away!" the leader's voice ordered, and the hands that had briefly released Kelly gripped her. She yelled in pain as someone else grabbed her hair and forced her to her feet. Once again the knife was back at her throat, but the sight at the end of the street made Kelly's heart swell in hope. A Spartan strode towards them. John, Kelly just knew it was him. He was alive. Everything was going to be okay.

"Let them go," he commanded.

"Don't come any closer," the man behind Kelly yelled, sounding panicked for the first time. The knife started to bite into Kelly's neck, and she gasped in fear.

John hesitated, clearly not wanting Kelly to be hurt. "Let's be reasonable," he said slowly, trying to take another step closer.

"I said, don't come any closer!" the man repeated, sounding close to panic.

The Spartan froze. "I'm sure we can work something out..."

There was a burst of static from behind Kelly, and Kelly-087's voice came through, scratchy but obviously hers. "Red-1, we are in position."

The Insurrectionists were the ones that hacked the signal, Kelly realized. John must have realized the same, for he didn't wait any longer. "Go!" he yelled, and the rest of Red team dropped from the rooftops around the Insurrectionists and their hostages. They charged forward, guns blazing as they tried to shoot down the enemy without harming Kelly or Lisa. Kelly saw John begin to run towards her-.

And suddenly she was falling. She couldn't see, couldn't move. She could barely hear the world around her. Kelly must have hit the pavement, but she couldn't feel anything. There was pain somewhere, everywhere, she had a distant knowledge of that, but she didn't know what had happened. "Kelly, can you hear me?" John's voice came from somewhere far away.

"John, she's gone, leave her!" another voice shouted, but Kelly could still feel John's presence. Cold. She felt cold too. At least the pain was fading.

"God, Kelly, stay with me," John urged, but Kelly couldn't obey. Something else was pulling at her, lifting her up. There was hardly any pain, and everything seemed brighter, even though she still couldn't see. "Kelly, if you can hear me, I love you. I love you so much. Dammit, don't leave me!"

I love you, Kelly tried to say, but rather or not her mouth actually moved, she didn't know. The pain was gone. The light was so bright, so beautiful... It was pulling her away. She wanted to stay

with John, she loved him so much it hurt, but the light soothed her pain. It promised a better future, a new world in which someday they could be together again. A place without war...

"Kelly, no!" John shouted, and the last thing Kelly could feel before all feeling vanished entirely was lips pressing against her own, a failed attempt to bring life back into the broken body that wasn't Kelly anymore. "I love you," the same voice said brokenly, but the words were pointless. Kelly had already gone.

31. Kelly Green

Chapter 31:

Kelly Green

Lieutenant Kelly Martin died that day on the planet of Levosia. Her body was never recovered, but was buried with the millions of others in one mass grave covered in glass. Years passed. The war with the Insurrectionists faded into the background as the seemingly one-sided war with the Covenant drew the UNSC's full attention and resources. The number of Spartan-IIs faded until few were left. The number of human-held planets dwindled as well, until finally, the fighting seemed to cease. Peace treaties were attempted to be brokered between the human and Elite worlds, due largely in part to the role that a single Spartan and a single Elite played together in the final fights.

Everything happened so quickly in the war. It wasn't until years later, asleep in cryogenic freeze aboard the derelict cruiser Forward Unto Dawn, that Spartan 117 could even begin to remember Lieutenant Kelly Martin. Frozen in time, dreams were his company as the AI that was his only companion quickly descended into rampancy. Scenes shifted before his closed eyes, all marred by the black smudges that marked dreams different than reality. A harshly lit, abandoned city... Words overheard as he knelt next to a broken body, the voices echoing harshly... _"That went well. I had some doubts, but they certainly seemed to pull it off."_ And the voice of agreement... _"He'll be the perfect soldier. We've all loved and lost... Now he knows how it feels, and she's not in the way to distract him."_ The sharp pain followed the sound of that, intensifying his own at the realization that her blood was on his hands, and his alone. If he had only done his duty and stayed away from her, she would still be alive...

The dream shifted in that way dreams do, stretching and squeezing at time until it was a different place and a different time altogether. A different woman, eyes ringed in red from crying, held up against a wall. The echoing increased as the sobbing words she uttered were joined by his harsh accusations. _"I didn't know, Chief, I swear! I was supposed to report to Halsey, but I swear I didn't know! It's my fault, if I had just come to my senses and realized something was wrong..." "You wouldn't have known until it was too late."_ He didn't mean to be so cruel, but the pain was still there, rubbing him raw from the inside out, it hurt so much... Then turning away as the woman, released, slid down to the floor and began weeping even harder.

The dream shifted again. The very green ONI agent stood before him

for what was the first time in memory. She seemed so much younger, so unsure of herself. She had changed so much in the short time that he had known her. From a young woman unsure of herself to a fighter. She hadn't gone down without trying to stand up for herself. She had grown so confident, proven that green wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She had been her own shade of green. Kelly green.

Time pulled at itself before seeming to disappear entirely. He found himself in a place that he thought had been lost to his memory over time, the one place of peace he had ever been able to find as a child in training. She was there. He knew it was her without needing to see her face. She stood against the tree next to the small stream, staring into its ripples as if they held answers to questions which human minds could not even begin to frame. "Kelly." At the sound of his voice, she turned to face him. Her wounds were gone, and instead of blood, her face held only a smile. She seemed to glow as she gazed at him. "John." Unable to do anything else, he pulled her into his arms. The pain that had been silently carried for so long had vanished, and he felt whole again. _"It wasn't your fault."_ Spoken like that, the words so certain, he had no choice but to believe her. _"I love you." "I love you. You've fought so long and so hard, and you're almost done. But I need you to keep fighting. I know you can do it." "I will."_ There was a silent pause. Nothing was spoken to break the peaceful pause, but there were words that still needed to be spoken. _"Don't keep holding yourself back. You're afraid to love, and understandably so. But if you lose her without her ever knowing..."_ She glanced back, seeing something that wasn't visible to him. _"She needs you, more than you know."_ She stepped back, and though he wanted to keep her there, hold her next to him, he knew he couldn't. She was right. _"I love you, but it's time to move on. Finish the fight."_ Her expression changed slightly, and when she spoke again, her words were in another voice, one as familiar to him as his own. "I need you." He tried to see her face again, but the dream began dissolving, darkness smearing over the bright and peaceful world. "Please!" Something stirred within him, and heat spread through his body as his heart began pounding again. "Wake up, John! Chief!" The same second voice was filled with fear and urgency. His eyes opened, seeing the true world for the first time in a long time. The owner of the voice stood before him as the cryo tube burst open. "John!"

"I'm here."

So there you have it. If you've made it this far, I hope you've enjoyed everything that you've read. It may not be every writer's goal to simply give their audience something to enjoy, but it certainly is mine. If you ever want to read any of my other works, I'm on Deviant Art as J3S51C4. Enjoy your new year, and keep reading, writing, and Halo-ing. :)

End
file.